

“Be in our shoes!”: An exploration of the need for a Student-Centred Ethos within Maltese Higher Vocational Education.

by

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Abstract

Students' dropout rates in Malta remain significantly high despite national and institutional efforts to address this issue. The purpose of this thesis is to give voice to critical student perspectives on a diverse set of issues that is typical of contemporary student life. Through their voices, I examine students' experiences within Maltese Higher Vocational Institutions.

This thesis uses a mixed methods approach (questionnaire, focus group and observational field notes) within an ethnographic case study framework, located within the two main Maltese Higher Vocational institutions - Malta College of Arts, Sciences and Technology and the Institute of Tourism Studies. The implications of the researcher's insider status within one of these institutions is also discussed.

The empirical research starts with an exploration of the current provision of student support services and moves onto an in-depth and wide ranging documentation of the myriad challenges that students currently face - academic, institutional, financial and emotional. By evidencing the volume and range of critique, the thesis aims to show, that these are not isolated or unique concerns and that they go to the heart of relationships between students, staff, administrators and management within any educational institution. It substantiates some of the students' critique by drawing upon recent external audit reports for both institutions. It situates the findings within the critical literature calling for greater student participation in the design and delivery of education and related services. In doing so, it makes the case of transforming Maltese Higher Vocational Education into a student-centred educational enterprise which has the ability and willingness to view students as parents in education. The thesis therefore, also considers key concepts of student voice, student-centredness, personalised education and student partnership in education and problematises them.

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Acronyms

HE	Higher Education
HVE	Higher Vocational Education
NCFHE	National Commission for Higher Education
ITS	The Institute of Tourism Studies, Malta
MCAST	Malta College of Arts, Sciences and Technology
MHVE	Maltese Higher Vocational Education
MHV	Maltese Higher Vocational
PE	Personalised Education
SC	Student-Centred
SCE	Student-Centred Education
SS	Support Services
SSS	Student Support Services
SV	Student Voice
UDE	Universal Design Education
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Chapter 1

Inclusive [student-centred] education is about ‘embracing everyone and making a commitment to provide each student in the community, each citizen in a democracy, with the inalienable right to belong.’

Villa and Thousand, 2005:5

Introduction

This thesis presents student perspectives on their experience of Maltese Higher Vocational Education [MHVE]. More specifically, this research first explores the provision of student support services [SSS] and then moves onto an in-depth and wide ranging documentation of the myriad of challenges (be they academic, institutional, financial and emotional in nature) that students face. This thesis attempts to give voice to critical student perspectives on a diverse set of issues that are typical of contemporary student life and which as stated by students, are not heard or welcomed.

By evidencing the volume and range of critique, this thesis aims to show that these are not isolated or unique concerns and that they go to the heart of relationships between students, staff, administrators and management with any educational institution. What has to be noted is that paradoxically, the provision of MHVE as experienced by students, is disengaging, thus detracting from institutional and national efforts to support the Europe 2020 strategy to reduce drop-out from vocation education and training [VET]. It is hoped that the information gathered for and presented in this study, makes the case of transforming MHVE into a student-centred [SC] educational enterprise and will in turn assist stakeholders, inter alia, in the reconsideration and possible reformulation of curriculum planning and development, resource allocation, pedagogy and qualitative communication structures.

The reasons why I chose to investigate MHVE are varied, yet interrelated. I have been working within higher vocational education [HVE] for the past 19 years. Moreover, within the same institution I work in, I have spent 4 years as a student - bringing my total exposure to MHVE to 23 years. Throughout these years, I could not fail to notice changes in student populations. Throughout this evolution, I also started to realise that in spite of all efforts made as an institution, we were not equipped to cater for the evolving, diverse, student populations. Additionally, within recent years, I also witnessed radical educational changes (for example the establishment of Malta Qualifications Framework in 2007; the introduction of the Malta Qualifications Council in 2005, which then developed into the National Commission for higher education in 2012). Although I understood the need for

such changes and valued these changes on a conceptual and theoretical level, I was increasingly becoming concerned about the implications these changes raised when implemented on a student, educator and institutional level. In view of this perception and my increasing interest in inclusive HVE, in 2009 as part of my Master's studies, I investigated the role of the national government in the shaping of Inclusive HVE within the context of 'Youths at Risk' in the Institute of Tourism Studies, Malta. As indicated in subsequent chapters, amongst the outcomes and suggested areas for further research, were 'student drop-out rates' and 'SSS' - both themes significantly influenced my Ed.D. Thus this topic was chosen to provide continuity to my previous research. For my Ed.D however, I wanted to give myself a more comprehensive scope so I decided to incorporate within my study, the two main Maltese higher vocational [MHV] institutions.

This introductory chapter is divided into four sections. The first and second section review HVE in the light of academic literature and local conditions. Further more, these sections portray the interrelationship of HVE with student drop-out rates particularly within MHVE. The third section introduces the empirical sites of this study. This chapter concludes with the main structure of this thesis.

1.1 Higher Vocational Education

HVE is discussed in the literature in many ways. The main dominant threads by which it is largely defined are those of a political, human resource and SC perspectives. These threads are elaborated upon in the next few paragraphs.

1.1.1 HVE - A Political Perspective

Recent economic crises appear to have hit hardest, young people, as evidenced through low figures of youth employment rates (Eurofound, 2012). As employment rates are understood to be positively effected by the level of education attained (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2015), this suggests that the higher the level of education, the better chances are for one to obtain gainful employment and to secure an adequate standard of living. This sagacity is validated on a national level more than on an international level. For example whereas the employment rate of those with tertiary qualifications in the EU is

of 75.5%, in Malta this is of 93% (Malta Independent, 2015). Additionally, whilst in Malta the graduates' employability index has risen (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2015), in the United Kingdom (UK) recent evidence that suggests a drop in the number of 21 to 30-year-old graduates in skilled work compared with a year earlier' (Financial Times, 2016), challenges this conventional wisdom. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suggest that a minimal level of 'appropriate' education is desirable. High rates of early school leaving and student drop-out rates therefore become important issues to address.

The European 2020 strategy attempts to address these issues. For example, one of its targets aims to reduce student drop-out rates from an average of 15% to 10% within the 27 European countries (European Commission, 2010:9). For some European countries namely: Malta (with a student drop-out rate of 39%), Portugal (with a student drop-out rate of 35.4%) and Spain (with a student drop-out rate of 31.9%), working towards this target seems to be too ambitious and unattainable (Comenius Network, 2010).

Whilst recognising that education is a difficult problem to be solved by no one simple formula (Ramsden, 1992 and Bartolo, 2016), the indicated drop-out rate of 39% of youths in Malta within the 18 and 24 age bracket, contrasts significantly with the positioning of the impact of the Bologna Process on higher education [HE] institutions in Malta, where it is stated that the recent introduction of the National Qualification Framework in June 2007, based on the level descriptors of the European qualifications Framework, has helped Malta "become more attractive as a destination for Higher Education; [and that] it provides the foundation for making Malta a centre of excellence in higher education" (National Team of Bologna Experts, 2011:10). The figures above show that something is not working as well as expected in the education systems and this thesis attempts to address these issues both through the literature review (chapter 2) as well as in the data and discussion chapters (chapters 4, 5 and 6).

In spite of the severity of the projected challenges ahead, national tangible progression towards this target is mandatory for the collective cohesion and well being of the young populations and the European community (European Commission, 2010). The aim of the government is to produce high quality post-secondary education and training in Malta and Gozo, to ensure that both islands are at the same level and standards of the best performing

countries. This explains national effort to ensure that individuals are encouraged either to take up vocational education and apprenticeship, or to be integrated directly within the labour market (ibid). In fact, the Maltese government, in an attempt to fulfil its international commitment to meet the targets set by the Lisbon Agenda, had increased the investment in higher and advanced institutions' 2009 budget by 11 million Euro (Malta Budget document, 2010). Politically, this has become a key area where outcomes are now expected to match this level of investment. Thus vocational education, which is seen as one way of matching education directly with potential employment, and thus with improved skills and income, has come to gain more attention as a key instrument of change.

1.1.2 HVE - A Human Resource Perspective

This perspective suggests that investment in people should not be limited to a select few, but should be evenly distributed amongst all strata of society including the unemployed, disadvantaged and unskilled groups, in order to ensure minimisation of skill marginalisation which may lead to risk of poverty. For example in 2014, the level of Maltese population at risk of poverty or social exclusion was of 23.8% (Malta Today, 2015). There was a marked increase of 8.8% since 2006 (National Commission for Sustainable Development, 2006:8) which indicates another reason to renew efforts to improve appropriate routes of education. Reducing the risk of poverty can be achieved if all people especially disadvantaged, are empowered to become independent and self-sustained (Borg and Calleja, 2006). Self-sustainment, equal opportunities and a high standard of living to all, can only be ascertained through a national strategic plan which incorporates a national education system intended to foster and promote inclusive learning opportunities (education for all), with relevant learning supporting structures (Malta Budget document, 2010).

Ramsden (1992) implies that investment in HVE constitutes nothing but a cost, by stating that HVE drains "the scarce national resources" (ibid:1) since many learners may decide to change the industry (field) trained in, or even more damaging, learners may decide to leave altogether the country of instruction (thus result in loss of investment for the country of instruction). In contrast, Stanlake (1976) argues that in spite of challenges and degree of

risks involved, investment in education is still valuable since an educated labour force is far more effective than an uneducated one. Furthermore, he asserts that higher socio-economic growth is dependent upon investments within higher vocational institutions and therefore it follows, that increases in investment will augment the country's opportunity to become a more competitive knowledge-based society.

In congruence with Stanlake (ibid) and in contrast with Ramsden (1992), the National Commission on Secondary Vocational Education in Italy (1984) posits that although challenging and risky, funding HVE is an investment (not a cost), as these institutions act as a catalyst that reawaken commitment of students, by motivating them not only to do better, but also in many cases, to remain in education since many young people enter HVE turned off to the learning process.

Such students (turned off, drop-outs or at risk of academic failure) can fall within the discourse of 'waste' of resources, of a nation's capital and human wealth. However, if one had to look at this situation from a SC perspective (which better matches my own perspective for the thesis), one could consider that turned-off students, are those whose needs have been ignored or unfulfilled and that they need adequate education and support. Their detachment from the learning process/environment is what contributes to the generation of truant behaviour which in turn, further exacerbates their risk of academic failure (Borg and Calleja, 2006).

1.1.3 HVE - A Student-Centred Perspective

Therefore as evidenced by academic literature (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012), reversing detachment into engagement can be better accomplished by the provision of student-centred education [SCE] and SS to give their educational journey more meaning and value. Such 'inclusive' vocational education is therefore central, because its output (student completion rates), is believed to contribute to the national socio-economic growth, by encouraging and supporting people to realise their full potential (Matovac et al. 2010). Increasing vocational education completion rates, aids employability, thus fulfilling key political and economic targets, as well as ethical and social obligations. The ethical and social responsibilities are arguably becoming significant in today's evolving inclusive

education systems, because learning is increasingly discussed as a process of ‘becoming’ (Colley et al., 2003). This perspective gives rise to the importance of holistic learning (addressing all areas of development in an individual) and development to achieve one’s full potential, alongside more traditional and standardised academic learning. It is hoped that this will in turn increase student completion and retention rates.

1.2 Student drop-out rates in Maltese HVE

As already indicated, student drop-out rates in Malta remain a challenge. Information about the Maltese education system and more especially, about the MHVE system, is found in appendix 2. However, in a preliminary effort to investigate student drop-out rates in MHVE, I collected the following data from the two main higher vocational institutes: namely, the Malta College of Arts, Sciences and Technology [MCAST] and the Institute of Tourism Studies [ITS].

Within MCAST, the drop-outs varied from 9% in 2003/04, 2004/5 and 14% in 2007/08, 2009/10 (Maltastar, 2012) to 11.7% in 2010/2011, 14.7% in 2011/2012 and down again to 13% in 2012/2013 (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014: 46). More worryingly, the drop-out rates within ITS, show a 17.4% drop-out rate in 2004 (excluding a 22% drop-out rate from the apprenticeship scheme), a 20.4% drop-out rate in 2005 (excluding a 39% drop-out rate from the apprenticeship scheme), a 22.5% drop-out rate in 2006 (excluding a 31.4% drop-out rate from the apprenticeship scheme), and a 43% drop-out rate in 2007 (excluding a 65% drop-out rate from the apprenticeship’s scheme [Thornhill, 2010:76]). Recent figures from ITS include a students’ drop-out rate of 22.0% in 2010/2011, 13.3% in 2011/2012 and 16.7% in 2012/2013 (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014: 46).

Additionally, previous empirical research I had conducted within one of the MHV institutions in 2010 (namely ITS), also suggested that there were some issues which were affecting students’ experiences. More specifically there was evidence of disaffection and truancy (Thornhill, 2010:iii). It was suggested that this disaffection which brought about detachment and in turn truancy, was also due in some part, to the inadequate pedagogical processes and insensitivity within the institution to student needs. The empirical research determined that other forms of detachment resulting from personality issues related to self-

esteem were also potentially inhibiting students from interpersonal integration, which in turn, brought about uncertainty. According to Borg and Calleja (2006), it is during this time of uncertainty and vulnerability, that students are at risk of academic failure (thus youth at risk) and should receive immediate support. That study suggested that the evolving challenging needs of both students and lecturers' alike were being unmet. I ended the study feeling strongly the need for further exploration of specific areas, particularly the reasons for high drop-out rates within MHV institutions.

1.3 The two main MHV Institutions: MCAST and ITS

The main providers for vocational education in Malta primarily include: MCAST, ITS, the Employment and Training Corporation and the Institute for the Conservation and Management of Cultural Heritage of Malta. However, this study will only focus on the two main MHV institutions namely MCAST and ITS. Background information about the Maltese Islands, its educational system (inclusive of its local HVE system), have been provided in appendices 1 and 2 respectively. General information about MCAST and ITS are included in the next two sections.

1.3.1 MCAST

MCAST was established in 2001 to meet the skills and knowledge necessary for a modern flexible workforce operating within a global and highly competitive economy (Cedefop, 2014). MCAST's main campus is situated in Paola, Malta. However, there are other satellites institutes in other parts of the island as well as one in Gozo. MCAST offers over 180 full-time and over 300 part-time vocational courses and academic programmes that prepare students for careers in industry, or for progressing within HE. MCAST, like ITS, is primarily a state-funded Further Education and HE institution. In particular, MCAST is an umbrella institution which houses the majority of the state vocational institutes and consequently vocational training in Malta. At the time of the study, MCAST incorporated nine Institutes exclusive of the Gozo Campus (as indicated in table 1) and enrolled over 6000 full-time students.

Table 1: *MCAST's Institutes as at May 2015*

Agribusiness
Art and Design
Building and Construction
Business and Commerce
Community Services
Electrical and Electronics Engineering
Information and Communication Technology
Maritime
Mechanical Engineering
* Gozo Centre

Since the data collection of this research (conducted in May 2015), MCAST has significantly changed its structure and as from October 2015, the above institutes were consolidated into six institutes (excluding Gozo Centre [as indicated in table 2]). Each institute is now fed through three main colleges: a Foundation College (for candidates following courses at MQF/EVET Levels 1, 2 and 3); a Technical College (for candidates following courses at MQF/VET Level 4); and a University College (for candidates following courses at MQF/VET Levels 5 and 6). Details about MQF/VET levels can be found in appendices 2a and 2c (iii) respectively.

Table 2: *MCAST's Institutes as at October 2015*

Applied Sciences
Business Management and Commerce
Community Services
Creative Arts
Engineering and Transport
Information and Communication Technology
* Gozo Centre

These colleges still offer a variety of study programmes at different MQF levels ranging from level one to level six (which is the degree level [NCFHE, 2016]). Like ITS, when achieving a particular qualification, students can either decide to join the workforce or else progress to a higher level of education within the same institutions. The mission statement of MCAST reads: "To provide universally accessible vocational and professional education and training with an international dimension, responsive to the needs of the individual and the economy." (MCAST, 2016).

1.3.2 ITS

ITS was set up in 1987 on a recommendation of the World Tourism Organisation and is currently the second national state vocation education training provider which specialises in programmes oriented towards the tourism and hospitality sector (NCFHE, 2016) - an industry of primary importance to Malta. ITS' main campus is located in St Julian's, Malta. However, similar to MCAST, ITS has other satellite campuses; one in Pembroke, Malta and one in Gozo. ITS in contrast to MCAST, has a very small student population (under 700 full-time students at time of study) and provides education and training at Level 2 to Level 5 on the MQF [as indicated in Appendix 2c (iii)]. Students completing VET qualification Level 5 in Hospitality Management can progress to a Bachelor Degree in Tourism Studies at the University of Malta (ITS, 2014).

Additionally, in contrast to the MCAST's mission statement, the ITS mission statement (or rather, its tag-line) is short and as a stand alone statement (in conjunction to one's personal definition of quality), may be open to different interpretations: "Quality learning to achieve excellence in tourism" (ITS, 2014).

However, unlike MCAST, ITS in addition to the above tag-line, also published the vision of the institution. In the publication of its vision (as well as values behind this vision), ITS claims to provide innovative, student oriented academic programmes intended to prepare its students for a career in 'tomorrow's tourism industry' (ITS, 2016). Additionally, whilst implying that it provides individual 'holistic' SS, it argues that it "directs its resources towards the development of inclusive learning programmes" (ibid).

1.4 Structure of thesis

The thesis contains seven chapters. Chapter 1 explains the background for the study and why it has been undertaken. Chapter 2, the literature review, sets out the existing academic context underpinning the research questions for the study, as well as the research questions that have led the research. Chapter 3, research methods and methodology, explores the research design and selected methods for the study. Chapters 4 and 5 present the data analysis. More specifically, chapter 4 presents the data analysis relating to students' perceptions on the current provision of SSS in both settings, whilst chapter 5 presents the analysis relating to claimed challenges and needs faced by the research participants attending both empirical settings. In Chapter 6, the results of the research are critiqued and discussed in the context of students' overall view and experience of MHVE system and in the context of related literature. Finally, the concluding chapter brings together the main findings from the study and reflects upon the approach taken within, whilst discussing implications and possible recommendations for policy makers, senior and junior institutional managers, academics as well as general staff .

Chapter 2

'The greatest challenge of all is for educators and policy makers to understand that piecemeal reforms cannot meet our current educational needs. Only a paradigm change - from teacher-centred instruction [or systems centred]... to learner-centred instruction... can meet the needs of all students and truly leave no child behind.'

Aslan and Reigeluth, 2015:68

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically explores a range of existing literature on broad approaches to education, particularly the value of SC inclusive approaches. In particular, the concept of SV is also explored. On researching I found very limited material on these topics that relate to the field of HVE specifically, and even less related to the Maltese context. Therefore, the literature drawn upon for this chapter is primarily associated with compulsory education or HE systems which have nonetheless informed my approach in this thesis.

This chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section provides a comparative literature review of the ways in which education systems have been discussed over time. The second section focuses on the concept of SCE and its relative approaches. Additionally, this section portrays how these approaches are amplified, sustained and helped to develop through the embracement of SV and student participation. It is worth noting, that the construct of SV and student participation in the design and enhancement of an education system, reflects the central theoretical perspective which has guided this whole thesis. The third section examines students' experiences and how these are influenced by the presence or absence of SV. The last section sets out the development of the research questions which have led the research.

2.2 HVE - yesterday, today tomorrow: An Occupational or an Holistic Educational Approach?

Traditionally, HVE has been seen as a way of providing education for students potentially joining the workforce after completion of their compulsory studies. In fact, HVE was primarily viewed as a production and occupation oriented approach to education (Kerr, 1991), intended to generate the development and application of knowledge and skills for middle level occupations needed by post-war societies (Moodie, 2008).

Some perspectives on HVE today, also claim to ‘holistically’ develop an individual to acquire full independence in society and to prepare students to live within a continuous evolving knowledge-based society, where uncertainty remains the only certainty (Cedefop, 2012). However, in view of the emergence of very sophisticated information and communications technologies, the 21st Century is different in many respects from the 20th Century (Dede, 2009). The chief difference is said to lie in the capabilities people are believed to need for work, citizenship and self-actualisation (ibid:1). As also implied in the National Commission for Higher Education’s referencing report (NCFHE, 2016), ‘remaining employable’ is one of the main challenges faced by most people. The report also argues, that the only way to address this challenge effectively is to nurture and develop flexible and adaptable interpersonal learning, as well as technical skills.

This kind of flexibility and this projected readiness for continuous regeneration of mind, is not seen as something that can be extracted from somewhere at time of adversity. It is understood to be nurtured and cultivated progressively, until it becomes a competence within an individual (ibid). This nurturing and cultivation of skill, is expected to happen within an educational environment where students can be guided through the skill acquirement process.

It has been said that to acquire these skills, students need to be supported ‘equally’ in the three main stages of academic accomplishment: from ‘underpinning knowledge’ stage, the ‘skills’ stage and finally the ‘competence acquirement’ stage (ibid). The need and importance of ‘flexibility and adaptability’ seem to be key considerations that echo through the literature that focuses on the future. The practice of these concepts (flexibility and adaptability), need to be frequent enough for each student to seek mastery - thus reaching the competence stage. This implies that the 21st Century curricula structure, needs to incorporate the right content, frequency and guidance required for each student to develop and master each of these qualities.

In relation to the 21st Century skills, the 2030 education strategy (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2015:7) argues an inclusive ‘no one left behind’ vision of education, that is intended to transform the lives

of individuals to ensure that all individuals “acquire a solid foundation of knowledge, develop creative and critical thinking and collaborative skills, and build curiosity, courage and resilience” to live and work in a knowledge-based, technology-driven world. The same declaration supports the development of work specific skills as well as high-level cognitive and non cognitive/transferable skills such as: ‘problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, communication skills and conflict resolution, which can be used across a range of occupational fields’ (UNESCO, 2015:17). The declaration also claims, that in spite of efforts made to address the required 21st Century skills, more focus is still required to ensure the overall quality, efficiency, effectiveness, and equity of existing education systems. Amongst its revised targets, the declaration urges all stakeholders that changes required need to be done at an ‘unprecedented pace’, if the ambitious revised targets are to be met (ibid:6). Specific guidance was given to HVE, indicating that existing vocational systems needed transformation and not adaptation and urged transformation particularly in the way vocational education is conceived, governed and funded (UNESCO, 2014). Schneckenberg, Ehlers and Adelsberger, (2011) claim, that the mission of HE for the 21st Century is to meet three goals: to develop learners' mastery of expert knowledge (specific to major disciplines); to foster learners' development of essential generic competencies; and to stimulate learners' reflection on day-to-day learning pursuits.

2.2.1 Contemporary Education Systems - Student-Centred or One-size-fits-all?

According to UNESCO (2014 and 2015), contemporary worldwide education systems have recorded improvements since 2000, in spite of the fact that the ‘Education For All’ targets have not been met. In fact, the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration builds on the ‘unfinished business’ of the previous agenda and sets the route for the next inclusive, ‘no-one-left-behind’ educational targets (ibid:6).

Hargreaves (2006), compares contemporary and 21st Century education to the business concepts of mass production and mass customisation respectively. More specifically, he implies that contemporary education still falls within the 19th Century educational model and reflects the mass production concept whilst the idealised, perhaps as yet

unrealised 21st Century model, is reflected by the mass customisation concept intended to meet the needs of students more fully than it happens in contemporary education.

In partial agreement with Hargreaves (2006), Fielding (2008:56) too is not happy with contemporary education as he terms it an impoverished “high performance schooling”, which is not meeting the needs and expectations of the students. Stoddard and Standard-Examiner (2012:2) also claim, that public education “has been stuck on a flat plateau” and argue, that contemporary education systems are incorrectly set up to standardise students like ‘stoves or refrigerators’ and that the adverse consequences of this not only affects students’ development and wellbeing, but also affects student retention rates (ibid:1). Stoddard and Standard-Examiner (ibid:2) hence urge educational institutions to stop “educating for uniformity (standardisation of students) and to start ‘educating for variety’”, so as to help “students grow in their unique talents and gifts [so they] feel they have an important contribution to make”. For me this vision resonates to a certain extent the Montessori and Steiner (Waldorf) educational ideologies used in the early 20th century, which put the uniqueness of each student as the foci of their own educational pathways.

Colallilo Kates (2005:1) is also critical of contemporary education systems and claims that whilst attempting to train students to compete in a global economy, educational systems have developed what Hillman (1999) termed, the ‘objective observer’ approach, in the process of which, educational environments have become much too *obsessed* with systems, numbers, acquisition and achievement to the detriment of what they believe is a holistic vision of education; that of educating the ‘whole (the academic part as well as the psychosocial part)’ of the student. This ‘objective observer’ approach, in Colallilo Kates’ and Hillman’s views is neglectful of a key developmental aspect of young adults. It is argued that the ‘objective observer’ approach may not be as objective as is claimed to possibly be, since it is also claimed, that education providers can have different if not opposing perceptions, to what both employers and learners have in relation to how well-prepared students are for the labour market (European Commission 2016:2). This suggests that the educational arena is populated with diverse agendas, interests and ideologies, that may not always be compatible with each other, making any claim to be the ‘right’ approach to education debatable.

Like Colallilo Kates (2005), Magolda (2007) posits that recent education systems primarily focus on knowledge and intellect, which can be defined within set curricular and assessment systems. Magolda (ibid) elaborates further and asserts, that these same educational structures reflect a very controlled environment which is not representative of the ‘out-of-control’ environment found outside the educational walls. Magolda (ibid) proceeds by asserting that life may be about dealing with ‘out of control’ situations, thus implying that contemporary education systems do not equip (or empower) students with the right skills to fulfil the adaptability and flexibility required for the future. This line of thought is also supported by the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration (UNESCO, 2015:17) which asserts “a narrow focus on work-specific skills” reduces graduates’ abilities to adapt to the fast-changing demands of the labour market. This is highly significant to vocational schools which are closely associated with the world of work and the immediate labour market (UNESCO, 2014).

Edward de Bono, a Maltese physician and creator of the notion of ‘lateral thinking’ (and co-founder of the School of Thinking in New York [De Bono, 2016]), is similarly critical of contemporary approaches to education, especially in terms of the development of young people. In his book ‘I am Right, You are Wrong’, De Bono (1991) argues that compulsory education, in the process of fulfilling its main function (of ‘expensive babysitting’ [ibid:246]), is erroneously leaving out what he claims to be the most basic of all human skills: thinking. More alarmingly, De Bono implies that the education system is ignorant of this reality. He asserts “people in education can conceive of thinking only as ‘analysis’ and ‘critical thinking’ (ibid: 247)”. For him, what is provided in education is the reactive part of thinking and it leaves out the most important part - the productive and perceptual part. In order for students to function in society, De Bono urges the nurturing of ‘operacy’ skills within curricula, as these operacy skills in his opinion, help individuals grow and self regulate and thus, are key to empowering students to ‘pull together the factors needed to think about anything’. De Bono makes it very explicit however, that he sees any radical transformation of the education system as a remote if not unlikely event, as for him, “people in education are locked in a system” (ibid, 248) which is hard to come out from, due to what he terms ‘apostolic succession’ (where new recruits in education, are chosen in the ‘image of those who are already there’ [ibid:265]).

Perhaps one common thread across diverse thinkers and academics like Hargreaves, Fielding, Stoddard and Standard-Examiner, Colallilo Kates, Magolda and De Bono, is their critique of contemporary education as a place, that *does not* focus on the student's desires, needs, and goals. In addition, Coates (2010:XV) claims that contemporary education "harness[es] young minds to engineer the future of our planet". For Coates, this suggests that the contemporary schooling *engineers* pupils' minds through a fixed structure [the harness]), with the intent of shaping the future. I find that Coates' imagery accords with the essence of my study, since a fixed structure (form of education), often represents a one-size-fits-all way of thinking. In this imagery, the 'harness' (set structure) can suggest coercion or at best, containment, which in turn, could reflect the absence of student autonomy or voice in shaping the nature of the education.

Agius Ferrante (2012) implies, that the provision of a one-size-fits-all system of education automatically excludes students (both at a symbolic and a factual level), who for some reason or another (students coming from different myriads of social realities) do not fit in the provided 'one-size' structure. The latter structure does not or cannot value the uniqueness of each student present within educational institutions (ibid, 2012 and Bartolo, 2016). A structure which cannot accommodate for individuals with diverse backgrounds, needs and dispositions, inevitably impacts negatively on students, as their experience of education is not commensurate to expectations or needs (Fielding, 2008 and Agius Ferrante, 2012). In such restricted settings, students may not be given the chance to fulfil their own potential and as a result, can cause many to leave the education system unprepared and disillusioned (Agius Ferrante, 2012:99). Since engagement is significantly linked with academic success (Manning, Kinzie, and Schuh, 2006), it follows that students are at risk of academic failure when they are disconnected from the system (Borg and Calleja, 2006).

According to Pomar and Pinya (2015), the impact on the student is greater than that. Both authors take the long term developmental impact of everyday practices and claim that every education practice is an experience which does not go unnoticed in students and should not be underestimated by educators, or viewed as affecting their period of studies only. More specifically Pomar and Pinya (2015:112) assert that educational

experiences leave an imprint (in this case a negative one) on one's life, long after the experience ends... ('what has been lived through has built the sediment [in students] from which "the world is looked at, things are understood, and which guides on[e] how to act"'). This means that if a student has a negative educational experience, this might remain with him throughout one's life and thus impact one's outlook on future learning within formal contexts.

In the Maltese context, in spite of significant educational advances in terms of numbers of students and an expansion of educational provision, it is still felt that the educational system requires reform (Bartolo, 2016; Borg [in Xarabank], 2016 and Cefai and Cooper, 2010). Professor Borg, a veteran in Maltese education claims to have his disappointments in the local education system. For him, the system 'tarmi itfal' [throws away/dumps kids]. He explains that when one looks at statistics, one realises, that reference to 'quality education and accessible education' is nothing but a political rhetoric, as he infers such terms do not reflect the local students' experiences. More specifically, he argues that his disappointments derive from the fact that, in spite of our international commitment for 'education for all', "we still have a situation where one-third of the student population (after 11 years of full time education), still exits *without* basic competencies; 20% of the 18-24 age group are not in education, employment, or training (NEET's); and there is recorded a significant difference (of approximately '40 punt percentuali' [40 percentage points]) in educational performance between the 'privileged' students and the 'working class' students" (Xarabank, 2016).

The Maltese minister of education and employment, whilst referring to the national secondary education system, also implies that the education system needs reform in order to reach out to diverse learners (Bartolo, 2016). In agreement, Cefai and Cooper (2010) posit that the local secondary education system is not free of problems. Amongst the emergent themes of their research involving students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, there were inter alia: inaccessible curriculum and unconnected learning experiences; perceived oppression and victimisation; and lack of SV. Students in this research not only struggled to adapt ('discipline is a must, but not this tight - it's too much' [ibid, 189]), but also rebelled at the rigid and autocratic system of education ('leaving them with no option but to fight the system or disengage from it' [ibid:190]).

Similar disaffected views were expressed by MHVE students in Spiteri's (2015:37) ethnography on student interactions within the MCAST college canteen:

I do not like the place. I never felt part of MCAST. Nobody tries to make anyone feel a part of MCAST. Everyone thinks feeling a part of MCAST just happens. I am just a number here.

I have to leave. If I do not leave, I will go mad. I need to be myself. I need space. Where can I go for space? Where do I go where I will not feel caged in? The canteen? The library? What do I come to MCAST for, though? Everyone comes for the lectures. That is everyone, but me... Bugger it. I am leaving.

This negative experience sheds light into the possible existence of the 'harness' concept identified by Coates (2010). The stifling feeling of this harness which urges the student to leave the institution, also sits well with Pomar and Pinya's view, that this kind of alienating experience will leave a negative impact on the student. Clearly the student is not adapting to the system in place and the system in this case, has not adapted to the student's needs either.

The Maltese Minister of education agrees that a one-size-fits-all system which demands adaptation from students does not work. He argues that diverse students *cannot* fit into one box (Times Talk, 2016). This has been the main argument in favour of an inclusive education system, one which places the uniqueness of students at the centre of educational, social and political renewal (Fielding, 2008 and Agius Ferrante, 2012).

2.3 Inclusive (Student-centred) Education System

Student populations are diverse and constantly changing (Gosper and Ifenthaler, 2014). Trying to accommodate these diverse needs and changes through inclusive approaches remains a key challenge (Agius Ferrante, 2012). Inclusive education is therefore about the provision of equal rights and opportunities for learning, irrespective of one's individual diversity (Villa and Thousand, 2005; Agius Ferrante, 2012; UNESCO, 2014 and 2015). More specifically, Villa and Thousand (2005:5) posit, that inclusive

education is about “embracing everyone and making a commitment to provide each student in the community, each citizen in a democracy, with the inalienable right to belong”. Inclusion assumes that living and learning together benefits everyone, not just children who are labeled as being ‘different’ (e.g. these who are gifted, are non-English proficient, or have a disability).

This vision in tandem with the vision of Education 2030 and the Education Strategy 2014-2021 (UNESCO, 2015:6 and 2014), promotes a notion of education for ALL (and not a selected few) and imply interrelated support to all (in order to make the above commitment ‘inalienable’ to each student), including previously marginalised or disadvantaged, vulnerable groups. Disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, are usually described as those with a disadvantage like those with disability, people with low proficiency in English, people who live in socially and economically vulnerable areas, early school-leavers, those with poor educational attainment, people in correctional institutions (or on probation services), women seeking to re-enter the workforce, older workers who have been displaced from the workforce and those displaced or at risk of displacement (Bowman, 2004). Bowman (ibid: 247) also includes two new categories of disadvantaged groups which he identified as youth ‘at risk’ groups namely; “unemployed students and students aged 19 years or less”.

It is curious that all students aged 19 or less, also fall within this disadvantaged category irrespective of whether they may or may not have any impairment or disability or economic or cultural disadvantage. It follows therefore, that their ‘youth’ (their early stage in life itself), places them at some disadvantage within social structures and institutions that are designed by older, more advantaged people. This is a strong critical stance that makes it incumbent upon institutions, to provide relevant and effective SC approaches, to ensure that students do not fail “at school and/or in making a successful transition to work” (Borg and Calleja, 2006: ix).

O’Neill and McMahon (2005), identify two broad orientations to educational provision namely SC learning and teacher-centred learning. Cousin (2010), suggests the incorporation of a third orientation namely that of ‘threshold concepts’, which in its neutral form (not SC or teacher-centred), explores difficulties or challenges faced in

ones' subject area, in partnership with students, subject specialists and educational developers. For the purpose of this study in the next few paragraphs, my focus will remain on student-centredness.

SC learning or SCE as also known, is an interchangeable concept widely used in education and for this reason, can have different meanings to different people (O'Neill and McMahon, 2005). In order to avoid confusion whilst at the same time, support one of the most important notions of this thesis – that student-centredness should be reflected within *the whole educational environment*, I will from now on, refer only to SCE.

O'Neill and McMahon (ibid) posit that SCE has also been frequently linked to teacher/educator's preferred concepts, such as flexible learning, experiential learning and self-directed learning. However, the authors assert that at its core, SCE is really about putting students at the centre of the learning process and the learning environment (O'Neill and McMahon, 2005; Fielding, 2008; Agius Ferrante, 2012). O'Neil and McMahon (2005) also argue that the degree of student-centredness varies significantly from one interpretation to another and hence from one learning environment to another. For example, the authors claim that in certain situations of SCE more than in others, student autonomy and responsibility are heightened to extreme levels, where "students might not only choose what to study, but how and why that topic might be an interesting one to study" (ibid:2 whilst citing Rogers, 1999:244). This would imply that in such environments, SV (which will be discussed later in the chapter), is given value and prominence. In other situations however, O'Neil and McMahon define student-centredness as the transition from student passive-learning (acquired through teacher-centred education) to student active-learning, with teachers focusing on student-learning activation processes during in-class interactions.

Literature also presents conflicting views about the evolution of SCE. These views seem to fall into three main camps: those who argue that there has been a paradigm repositioning in classroom education (namely from the traditional teacher-centred learning methodology to the SCE methodology [Knowlton, 2000]); those who are in full disagreement that this paradigm repositioning actually took place (O'Neill and

McMahon 2005, Lea et al., 2003), and those who argue, that SCE is no recent idea and that it is a concept that dates back to the early 1900 and which originates to varying extents, from the works of Hayward, Dewey, Rogers, Piaget, Knowles, Froebel (O'Neill and McMahon, 2005) and Montessori, and therefore, as something that has permeated educational systems to varying degrees.

Stoddard and Standard-Examiner (2012), in agreement with O'Neill and McMahon (2005), critically argue that some institutions are mistaken in thinking that they are practicing SCE when in reality they are not. For example, Stoddard and Standard-Examiner (2012) affirm that instead of SCE, some institutions apply subject-centred education which they find significantly distant and non-conducive to the benefits of student agency, autonomy and relatedness imparted by SCE (O'Neil and McMahon, 2005).

However, SCE is not seen as totally beneficial. It is argued, that SCE may be rejected by students who are already accustomed to teacher-centred learning (Prosser and Trigwell, 2002). Additionally it is claimed, that SCE may be more challenging when applied in large classes (O'Neill and McMahon, 2005) and thus as a whole, may impact negatively on teachers (Cousin, 2010). For Simon (1999), there is the danger that those implementing SCE may inadvertently slip one's focus onto the individual learner as opposed to the required focus on all learners.

Without going into the merit of whether individual educators may or may not slip one's focus onto the individual learner as opposed to all learners, I see no 'danger' in this as I view both the collective (Universal) and the individual approaches at different ends of the same inclusive SC continuum. Before I elaborate on this conception however, I would like to include some literature about both the universal and the personalised educational approaches.

2.3.1 The Universal Design Education Approach

Universal Design Education [UDE] also known as 'differentiated' education does not mean a single solution (Rose and Meyer, 2008) but a framework or philosophy, where

each unique student, is the foci of the whole education process (Tessaring and Wannan, 2004).

Although the ‘universal design’ concept has its roots in architecture (Eagleton, 2008), it has been used successfully also within the educational sphere (UNESCO, 2014:9). For example Dell, Dell and Blackwell (2015) used UDE principles for online courses for learners with disabilities, Zydney et al. (2014), used UDE principles in curricula content and Katz and Sugden (2013) used UDE principles also at an organisational level.

UDE is now seen as a blueprint to guide the design of learning environments that are accessible and effective for all (CAST: Home, 2015). Eagleton (2008:5), who claims to be in agreement with Mace (originator of the universal design concept), argues that in spite of the approach being ‘universal’, it may not necessarily be accessible and effective to *all*. In fact, Eagleton (ibid) defines UDE as “an approach to the initial design of products, services, and environments to ma[k]e them usable by as many people as possible regardless of age, ability, or circumstance”.

In more practical terms, UDE is a structure which proactively examines the needs of diverse student populations and use this awareness to inform curricula (different avenues to learning), services and environments that are more functional, accessible and appropriate to a broader range of people with different backgrounds, learning styles and cognitive abilities (Rose and Meyer, 2008 and Katz and Sugden, 2013). This proactive approach incorporates inclusive measures in its educational and institutional design, primarily to minimise (not eliminate), the need for potential personalised accommodations and approaches (Eagleton, 2008).

2.3.2 The Personalised Education Approach

The education strategy 2014-2021 claims ‘in the current global context, there is a heightened sense of urgency about addressing the learning needs of youth...’ (UNESCO, 2014: 20). Although these needs are constantly evolving, one common understanding remains, that student populations have significantly diverse psycho-social and cognitive needs (Ramsden, 1992; Pijl and Frissen, 2009; Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012). In fact, personalised education [PE] is the customisation of education

to fit individual needs and interests and goals in order to ensure that every student achieves the highest standard possible (Leone, 2013).

In agreement with O'Neil and McMahon (2005), Leone (2013:30) asserts, that PE is a process which empowers the individual student to decide 'what, where, when and how to learn'. It is the ultimate form of inclusive education (Agius Ferrante, 2012) which is said to increase student participation, autonomy and agency (Leone, 2013). However, in contrast, Hargreaves (2006) argues that PE or 'customisation' as he also calls it, requires significant changes to educational systems. In fact Hargreaves (ibid) compares this transition to the transition that has taken place from mass production to mass customisation in the industrial sector. Additionally, it is implied that the application of PE puts significant strain on already impoverished educational resources, since addressing individual learning needs is time and resource consuming (Leone, 2013).

Fielding (2008) provides a contrasting view of PE. Despite his critique (due to his belief that the real intention behind PE is economic and market-driven, more than student-driven), this evolving educational 'mantra' is a new educational concept with no academic corpus to support its effective implementation. Fielding confers that in its idealised provision (thus student welfare not economic or marketing based welfare), PE can give significant voice to students. However, students do not totally share this point of view. In a research conducted by Rogers (2013), students express their concern as they argue that, PE is really about obtaining better grades and enhancing school reputation, rather than about developing and liberating students' potential. Rogers (ibid) sees this as deviating from the original purpose of PE which he views as a process of social justice and interpersonal democracy.

Rogers (2013) implies that this may also be due to the fact that, PE is not clearly defined down to the levels that matter. More specifically Rogers (ibid:4) blames policy makers, who in his opinion, present visions of education (such as PE), to "draw generalised headlines and "sound bites" that then leave details for a wide variety of players to fill in, [and] can end up saying nothing to those public servants who have to translate it". He asserts that leaving the vision of PE ambiguous, brings about different interpretations which then may induce 'implementers' to deviate from real purpose of

PE (such as the one accounted about by students). Additionally, he questions the viability of such effective implementation of policy, which does not take into account any of the direct experiences (with students) of public servants, who are exposed to students' realities, and who, if involved on a collaborative level (not just consultative level), may relate and contribute well to the preemption of challenges of implementation and development.

The tension between the UDE and the PE Approach

The no-one-left-behind (Peters, 2007) and the education-for-all concepts, both incorporate a sense of holistic student development (UNESCO, 2015). It is possible to see a degree of overlap (and minor differences) across the different notions of education identified in this chapter. They all seem to speak about the overarching vision of inclusive education, to some degree or other.

For instance, the UDE principle with its focus on curricula design can be the main tool used to create the initial conditions, structures and general frameworks required for inclusive learning and development. However, I find that this same 'tool' if left in isolation (meaning left with the mere basic provisions of different avenues for different learners), will not render very different results since it follows, that to aim for the highest success rates (in this case the 'no student left behind' concept), UDE requires other equally significant SCE strategies and approaches: namely, PE of which effectiveness is significantly dependant, on the contribution and continuous investment and development of SC support and student participation systems (SV), practices and interactions.

In more practical terms, within the inclusive SC domain, the UDE approach and the PE approach lie at different ends of SCE continuum where one may argue, that PE is the intensification of UDE, since the provision of PE ranges at different levels of the same continuum. In fact, PE moves away from the provision of collective inclusive products and services (UDE) to more individualised products and services (thus uniquely inclusive) depending on the extent and specific needs of the student concerned.

Applying this to what is explored in previous sections, in agreement with Eagleton (2008) I argue, that UDE approaches (through applied structures and practices), preempt and provide for known diverse students' needs, whilst PE approaches address emerging individualised students' needs unforeseen or uncared for by the UDE approach. However, I also argue that such personalised products or services cannot be effective, without the provision of structures to amplify SV, as these voices determine the degree of PE required in the first place. Therefore it follows, that SV opportunities are central to this most inclusive form of education.

2.3.3 SV - A Bedrock Principle?

Wolfendale and Corbett (1996:3), argue that it is a "... bedrock principle of any student's human right to be treated with respect and as a partner in the learning enterprise...". In the world declaration report on HE for the 21st Century (UNESCO, 1998: article 10 [c]), it clearly stipulates 'national and institutional decision-makers should place students and their needs at the centre of their concerns, and should consider them as major partners and responsible stakeholders in the renewal of HE'. Similarly, Pomar and Pinya (2015:111, 113) consider students 'as valuable experts who's opinions should be sought for the betterment of school', as in the authors' opinions, students can contribute to the assessment of the state of education (as in the case of this study), to its management and evaluation. Similarly, Mitra (2006:8) posits that students' views are valuable especially because she claims that students 'possess knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate'. Cook-Sather (2014) acknowledges, that singular perspectives (feedback from just one student), may not signify much to persons with different perspectives especially, but she argues, it is the intersections of the singular (feedback from just one student) and the plural (feedback from many students) - and the richness of insight they yield, that make "multiplying perspectives" equally valuable (ibid:42). This implies that students are not to be viewed as mere beneficiaries or customers of the education system, but they are to be viewed as partners and collaborators to its design, its quality assurance and to its enhancement (Cefai and Cooper, 2010).

Similarly, Ginnis (2012:30) argues that students become motivated, engaged and open, when they have some control over learning. This implies that students ought to play an important role in shaping the services that are designed to educate and support them. For all this to happen, students require open communication structures within the institution. This aspect of communication, is also known as SV.

According to Mitra (2009), SV is a self-determining goal setting. Therefore, apart from the benefits to students agency and identity formation, SV is also seen as a potential strategy for improving school reforms (Mitra, 2004 and Fletcher, 2015). Comparably, Fleming (2015:223) claims that the word SV or rather the language and terminology relating to the concept, includes variously different terms which are used interchangeably (for example: participation of students, involvement of students, listening to students), to reflect the engagement ‘in interaction with peers, teachers and school authorities on matters and issues that affect them in their school experiences.’

Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) argue ‘voice’ aims to provide students with opportunities (within and outside the educational institutions), to express oneself and influence decisions affecting their life as a whole. Flutter and Ruddock (2004) posit that SV (through the concept of social justice), aims to permeate democratic practices through where positive conflict resolution between students and respective educational representatives can take place.

For Fletcher (2015), SV is more than simply providing an opportunity and listening to students. It is the “... individual and collective perspective and actions of young people within the context of learning and education (ibid)”. This implies that SV takes place both in spoken and unspoken forms. Therefore, if we apply the above definition of SV to the context of the learning process, one concludes that SV is not a new occurrence and was always existent. Although unspoken, in the educational paradigm of teacher-centred education ideology, SV was represented in the form of student silence (truancy in mind) and in the form of student absence (physical truancy). It is worth noting hence, that it is the *spoken form* of SV, which has recently emerged or rather, has been recently reinforced through the educational vision of student-centredness.

Fielding (2001:100) however, questions the motive behind this ‘apparent vogue for encouraging the voice of young people in school’. He refers to this wave of encouragement as ‘a movement’ with a potential ‘dual capacity’ to either genuinely develop transformative practices in student involvement, or to equally and manipulatively retain securely, established norms of communications and control (ibid). The provision of either opportunity, is essentially based on the view of students held by policy makers, administrators (and general and supporting staff) and educators alike (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012).

Fletcher (2015) and Fielding (2001) assert, that SV and its relevance in education, receives mixed responses and is viewed in conflicting ways. These conflicting views fall under different facets namely: those who view SV in a rhetorical and humouristic way (therefore, do not see the real value of SV); those who argue that SV is ‘peripheral’ and tokenistic (therefore, do not give SV the importance it needs to be effective); those who view SV as ‘irrelevant’ if not ‘corrosive’ of the already diminished control of the teaching profession (therefore potentially stifling SV opportunities); and finally those who genuinely welcome the concept and attempt to cultivate the culture of student contribution (ideal scenario).

Administrators in particular admit, that all this interest in SV, stems primarily from audit requirements and not from authentic interest in what the student has to say (Fielding, 2008:108). In view of this, Fielding (ibid) solicits a structured transition from existing high performance school-based cultures, to person-centred education (hence moving from a system-based ethos to a SC ethos). Some students on the other hand, view SV as a prerogative of a selected few making them still feel unrepresented. In research conducted by Rogers (2013), students assert that some SV is structured in certain areas but not in others (for example, pedagogy) and that although they could perceived the ‘drive’ for SV, they realised that this drive was fuelled more by organisation benefits (reputation and higher grades) than by student benefit. This makes them still feel invisible to the educational system.

The view of students held by administrators, educators (etc.) and the relative impact these views have on the choice of SV opportunity, are better explained through the

exploration of two models of student participation. These models are the Toshalis and Nakkula's (2012) spectrum of SV model and the Arnstein's Student Level of Participation model. The Toshalis and Nakkula's (2012) spectrum of SV model (appendix 3), views students from three main perspectives (as data sources, as collaborators and as leaders of change). These perspectives unfold into six incremental stages of SV opportunities: namely, the 'Expression Stage' (the most basic stage where students simply volunteer opinions); the 'Consultation stage' (where students' opinions are solicited in more structured ways through focus groups or questionnaires); the 'Participation stage' (where students attend meetings/events, in the hope to influence decisions made); the 'Partnership stage' (where students collaborate with adults through more formalised roles); the 'Activism stage' and the 'Leadership stage' (both higher-end-level of SV opportunities, where students are significantly involved in educational problem-solving and decision-making).

On the other hand, the Arnstein's Student Level of Participation model (appendix 4), includes eight SV opportunities/'rungs'. These are further subdivided into three main categories, namely 'non-participation' roles (where students have no voice); 'tokenistic' roles (where students appear to be given a voice, but voice is used for statistical purposes); and 'citizen' roles (where students and adults work together and share decision-making opportunities).

In both models, the provision of SV opportunity depends on the value one has for students' opinion and one's desire to share decision-making power. Applying both models to the context of this chapter, it follows that in SCE systems (where students are viewed as central to the education provision), the chances of higher-end SV opportunities are more probable. In such educational systems, the opportunities for SV may range from activities which view students as 'collaborators' to 'leaders of change' (as in the Toshalis and Nakkula's model) or citizen roles (as in the Arnstein's model). Therefore, SV opportunities may range from requests to complete questionnaires; to requests to identify areas for improvements (with possible solutions); and requests for students to be included in decision-making processes. In a one-size-fit-all education system, these type of SV opportunities are not conceivable.

Although shared decision-making has positive effects on students, Denton (2003) asserts that effective SV has not been widely incorporated in education. In those institutions where SV is viewed as peripheral and tokenistic in nature (Arnstein's model), the range of SV opportunities are limited to the lower-end activities identified in both models, which at best, primarily view students as 'data sources' (Toshalis and Nakkula's model). In such educational environments, SV may start and finish with students being requested to complete a questionnaire about the quality of education or satisfaction levels. Students here are led to believe that their contribution matters, when in reality it does not.

While students' voices are typically not heard or valued, research suggests that students very much have the desire to participate (McKibben, 2004). Lamb et al. (2016) argue that this is also applicable to students with disabilities who 'are keen to express their viewpoints to anyone who will listen'.

Denton (2003) and Newman (1992) imply that the reluctance to involve students in decision making, stems from the fact that adults/authorities fear that if they share decision-making with students, the 'adult' power is diminished and consequently they might lose control. However, this way of thinking disregards the fact that students, can be reflective critics and rigorous decision-makers if given the chance (Schimmel, 2003).

Bain (2010) goes a step further and suggests, that the mere provision of an 'opportunity' for expression (whatever stage or rung level identified in Toshalis and Nakkula and Arnstein's models) is not enough to render SV effective. She explains (through a child's assessment model which she later adapted for an assessment model in HE [2010:19]), that four other equally contributing factors are required to render SV effective. These four contributing factors which include: *Space*, *Voice*, *Audience* and *Influence*, are based on the concept that students have a right to express their view and simultaneously, they have a right to have these views given due regard.

Dhillon et al. (2006) and Prebble et al. (2004), on the other hand, assert that the effectiveness of SV is also dependent on the disposition of the student to make use of the opportunity for SV provided. Zgaga (2005) in agreement with Dhillon et al. (2006)

and Prebble et al. (2004), claim that students, not only need to be willing to engage with that opportunity, but also needs to be able to engage with that opportunity. This implies that for a SV opportunity to be effective, it needs to be accessible and the content/ language used, needs to be within the students' level of competence and understanding. The overall effectiveness of the SV experience will render students' contribution more rewarding and memorable.

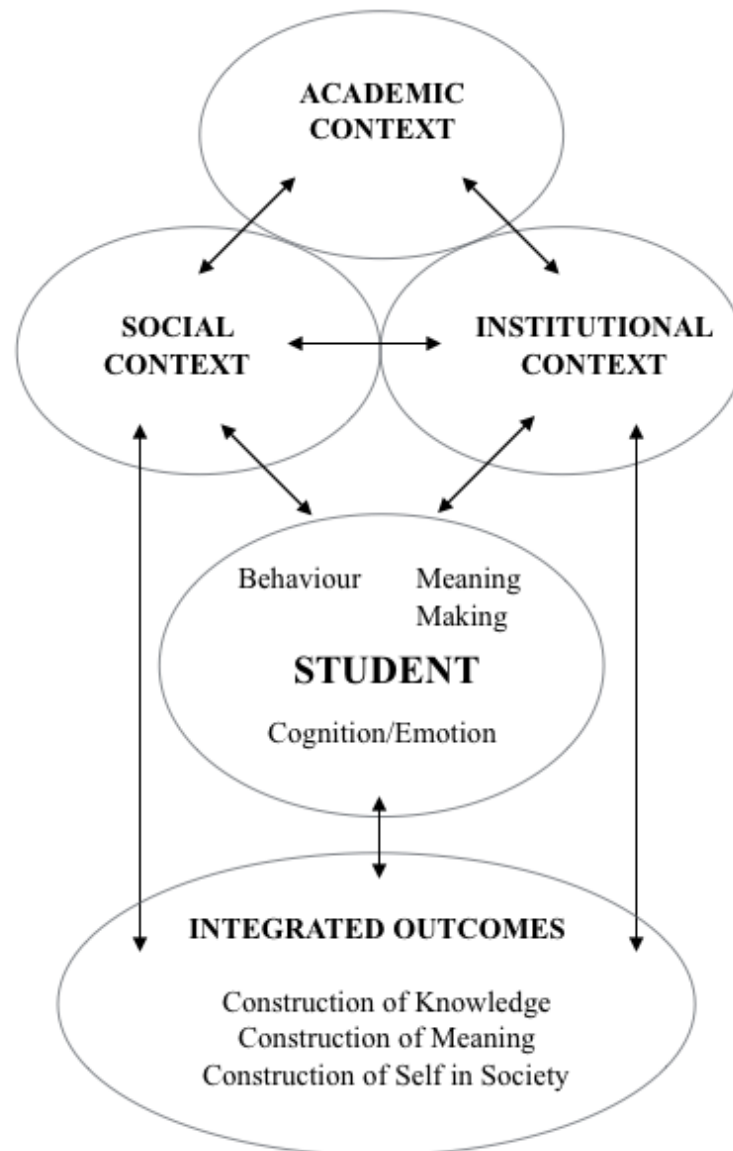
2.4 The impact of education systems on student experience, motivation and academic achievement.

Although there is no right answer as to what makes the best student experience, some factors have been recognised as significant influencers (European Students Union, 2013).

The European Students' Union asserts, that on a general level, there are seven elements found within an education system that impact positively or negatively on the students' learning experience. These elements (which are incorporated in appendix 6), primarily include: the curriculum (inclusive of content, delivery and assessment processes); the supporting structures found within (inclusive of learning resources, guidance and support); students' progression and achievement; and quality enhancement and assurance.

Similarly, the American College Personnel Association (2004) posits that the learning community, does not stop at the classroom walls, but expands to the entire campus. As one can see in figure 1, it is not just the academic context that impinges (both negatively or positively) on students' experiences, but it is a coalescence of the academic context, the social and institutional contexts. These contexts (which are interactive, interdependent and mutually shaping), can occur simultaneously and project to student's cognitive and emotional levels. The information received by the student, is filtered through the individual's unique 'frame of references' (the absorption of acquired information is influenced by one's life story and set of values) before acquiring meaning.

Figure 1: A campus-wide focus on the Student Experience



(The American College Personnel Association, 2004:14)

The American College Personnel Association (ibid) in citing King Baxter and Magolda (1996) argue a successful education experience impacts positively not only on a cognitive level, but also on a maturity and interpersonal level. More specifically, the Association encourages students to use self-reflection to reach transformative learning (places the self-reflective processes at the core of the learning experience), as when

students sharpen their self reflective skills, they acquire self authorship. Self authorship in turn, is defined as a way of creating meaning about one's life, one's values and one's future directions and is one of the 'higher levels of the developmental process' for adolescents (The American College Personnel Association, 2004:9).

Thus it follows, that through the development of self authorship, students are impacted differently by a one-size-fits-all educational system compared to SCE system. According to Volmari et al. (2009) and as also implied in Manning, Kinzie, and Schuh (2006), the impact on student experience in a SCE environment favours student participation and engagement and subsequently academic success. More specifically, through SV practices, students have the opportunity to express and analyse their unique academic and learning experience. Bain (2010) claims that in strong SCE environments, students' feedback will be listened to and after being genuinely taken into consideration, modifications or additions to products and services would be applied.

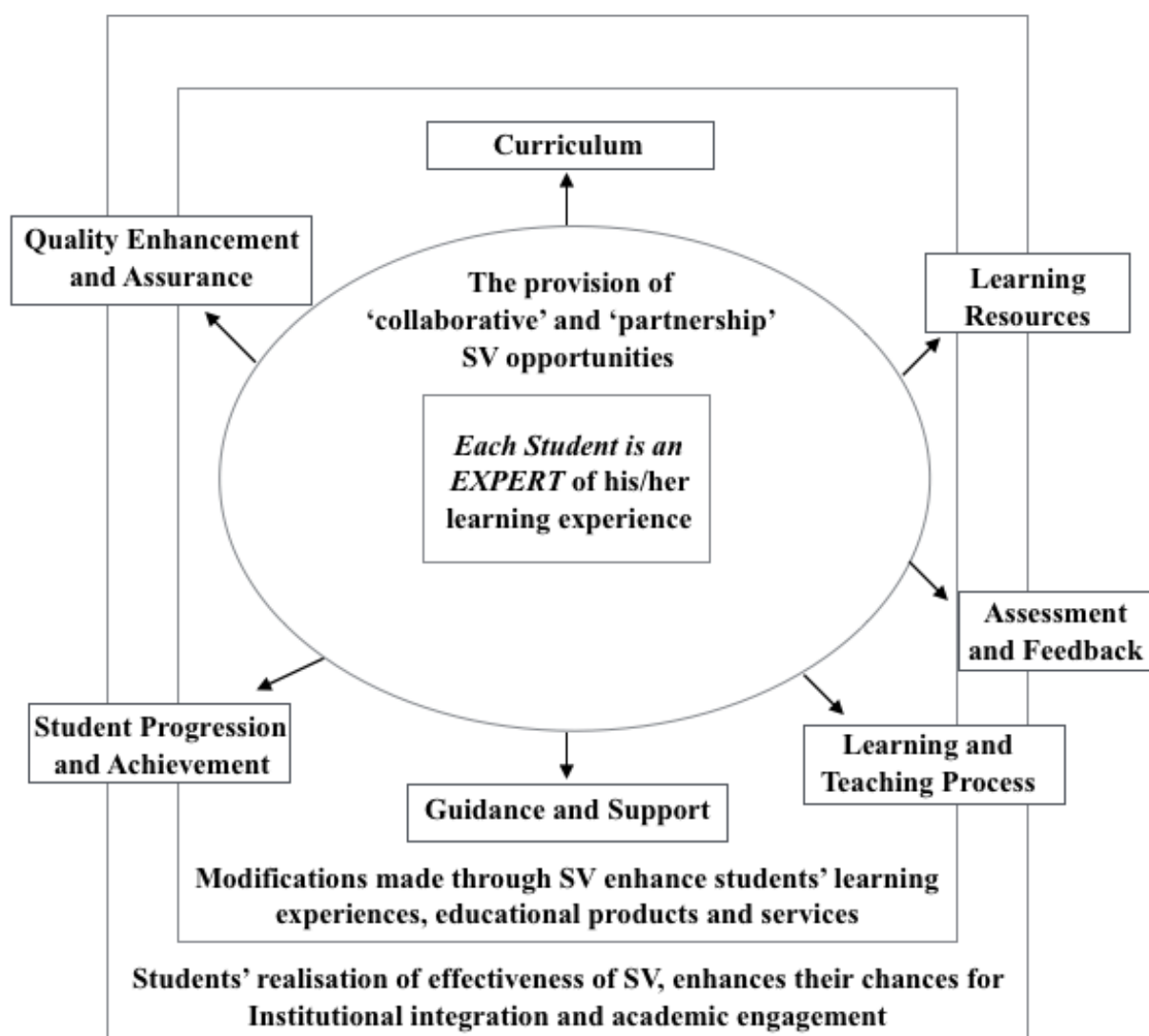
As can be seen in figure 2, I adapted the European Students Union model of students' learning experience (appendix 6), to reflect this process of student involvement, voice and collaboration and how this impacts the learning experience. These circumstances not only provide a psychological return to the students concerned (who feel satisfied and valued by same institution), but also contribute to the enhancement of products and services of the same institution, by regenerating the whole education system to make it more relevant, agreeable and tolerable to students.

In contrast however, the impact on student experience in a one-size-fits-all educational environment does not favour student participation and engagement (Bowden et al., 2015). On the contrary, according to Stoddard and Standard-Examiner (2012) students react negatively to it by rebelling, dropping out, bullying, or by becoming apathetic. Consequently this leads to the deterioration of student academic performance and an increased risk of academic failure (Borg and Calleja, 2006).

Therefore, if one had to apply the previously mentioned two types of school systems (namely SCE and one-size-fits-all systems), also to the context of SSS, one would argue that the SCE and not the one-size-fits-all system, would correspond and possibly

effectively meet, the evolving and interchanging needs of the diverse student populations (Volmari et al., 2006).

Figure 2: SV and its direct impact on student’s learning experiences



(adapted from the European Students Union, 2013:10)

2.5 The Research Questions

Considering the above literature as well as the international and national foci on student drop-out rates indicated in chapter 1, I initially wanted to research within both MHV institutions, the reasons behind student drop-out rates. However, on approaching the first MHV institution - which also happens to be my main place of work for the past 20 odd

years (excluding 4 years I also spent within the same organisation as a mature student), I was unexpectedly not granted access to carry out this line of research. Wanting to research both MHV institutions but particularly my 'own' organisation (also as a follow-up to my previous empirical study), I modified my research to primarily investigate the provision of SSS as well as students' needs, to determine whether or not there was a gap between the provision of support services [SS] and the evolving challenges and needs of the student populations.

In broader terms, I wanted to explore how students (disadvantaged or not) attending full time programmes of study, experienced their time within a national vocational setting. More particularly, I wanted to give voice to the students and relate their opinion of the education system on offer.

Considering all the above, I proposed the following central research question

- * How do students view and experience the MHVE system?

This central research question considers and is also based on the following sub-research questions:

- * How do students experience the support that is offered to them?
- * What are the challenges/needs of students attending MHVE?

I viewed this study not as an 'evaluation' of the two main MHV institutions but as an exploration of students' needs and experiences. As I set about designing the study and collected data to answer these questions, other key themes like 'student voice' [SV] and the need for a SC provision of education emerged. These themes are further explored in subsequent chapters.

2.6 To conclude

This chapter discusses different approaches to the place of students within education and how these may impact on student experiences and thus on academic achievement. Non-inclusive forms of education 'harnesses' students through the one-size-fit-all

system, which although not conducive to effective individual holistic learning and development, in its rigidity provides some form of predictability. On the other hand, the SC inclusive form of education nests various approaches (such as the UDE and PE approach) under its fold. The latter approach, constantly requiring investment and evolution in SV amplifying structures, practices and opportunities.

In practical terms, this study investigates how these principles operate (or not), within the MHVE contexts of MCAST and ITS. Additionally, my thesis explores current students' challenges and needs whilst also providing insights into their experiences within these institutions. More importantly, this thesis tries to represent the voices of the students living these HVE experiences. The overall findings and discussion of my empirical research is provided in chapters 4, 5 and 6. The following chapter details the methodology adopted in this study.

Chapter 3

'We'd like you to accept that all our knowledge comes to each of us through our individual knowledge and interpretive filters, and that the theories, frameworks and models introduced in this [thesis] are interrelated and informed by our own set of principles. Sometimes these principles and interrelationships are obvious, but other times you have to work them out.'

Lyons, Ford and Arthur-Kelly, 2011:5

Methodological Considerations

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section presents the evolving nature and the methodological rationale for this research, the second section explores the considerations which have influenced the development and the application of the research design of this study, whilst the third section discusses the main ethical considerations arising within this research.

3.1 The evolution of the research in response to the context in the field

From the start of the doctorate, I intended to research the area of MHVE which I had pursued for my masters studies in human resource development and performance management (Thornhill, 2010). That study explored amongst other areas, the provision or otherwise of inclusive education, the student support structure found within the same institution and the student learning process with its correlation to disaffection, truant behaviour and ‘youths at risk’ of academic failure. Amongst the findings of that research, was the observation that the students’ profile within this institution had changed over the years (for example, students had a lower academic background and students’ general behavioural problems seemed to have increased) and consequently this had influenced significantly the role of the lecturers (for example, teachers found themselves increasingly [pastorally] supporting students within and outside the classroom). The support structure was found to be basic and ineffective and there were high levels of student drop-out, and evidence of disaffection and truancy amongst the student population of the time.

Hence for my doctorate, I originally decided to investigate the reasons behind students drop-out rates with the aim to provide suggestions on how these figures could be effectively reduced. As already indicated in chapter one, this was not permitted by the institution where I was also working at this point and since my aim was to investigate within both MHV institutions, but particularly within the organisation I was working with (in order to provide continuity to my previous research), I decided to investigate an area of related interest; namely, the exploration of student perspectives on the provision of SSS and its relevance in meeting students’ challenges. My area of research has also been influenced by the aim to address gaps in local knowledge namely to investigate student

needs given the specific local and institutional conditions. However, this revised area of study was also, unexpectedly, unfavourably considered by the same institution. Perplexed and disappointed, I was set in my desire to investigate this last topic, so I decided to accept the decision of this institution and focus only on the other main MHV Institution - MCAST. I was very happy to learn, that this second institution not only immediately welcomed this research, but also extended continuous support throughout the rest of my research programme.

However, three years into the Ed.D. through an unexpected circumstance in my place of work, I managed to obtain clearance for research within ITS. This rendered me happy from one part but concerned from another, as I knew that most of my data collection had already been acquired from MCAST. I decided that if the second institution helped me once again, I would repeat the data collection in MCAST so that the data from both institutions fell within the same time frame. This decision was based on the fact that I had learnt that some minor changes to the students' services of MCAST had been made (the introduction of the 'SS coordinators' across each institute and the setting up of the students' hub right in the centre of the SSS department). I hoped that by revisiting MCAST, my data would be more up-to-date and reflect the changes and their impact on students. I also hoped that having data from the same year across both institutions would make them more easily comparable. The second institution (MCAST), was again very supportive of my request and I was in a position to repeat the data collection in both institutions in 2015. For the purpose of this research, all quantitative data for this thesis has been drawn from the 2015 data collections phase. However, due to the fact that I could not gain access to students in MCAST (lack of response from the students' union), I decided to also incorporate in this research, the qualitative data (students' responses obtained from the open-ended questions of the online questionnaire) acquired from MCAST in 2014.

In order to support me in the timely completion of this research study, I prepared a projected time schedule which provided me with a guided set of deadlines. This schedule has seen numerous revisions not only to deadlines, but also to the research direction as a whole. My thesis evolved even further and in addition to the investigation of the provision of student support within MHVE, I found myself delving deeper into students' perceived challenges and experiences within their educational journey.

3.1.1 The Methodological Rationale of This Study

Saunders et al. (2016) suggest that before researchers opt for any methodological approach, they need to determine or acknowledge their ontological (researcher's assumptions about the 'nature of reality' [ibid: 127 and Edirisingha, 2012]) leanings, as well as their epistemological (researcher's assumptions about human knowledge) and axiological positions (the way the researcher's values influence the research process). These positions (beliefs and assumptions) about knowledge, its nature and its production, are at the core of the whole research process, since this insight influences all aspects of research, including the development of the research questions, the ideological or political perspectives of the researcher, the methodological assumptions and methods used, as well as the interpretation and representation of the findings.

Research philosophies are described and classified in many ways. For example, Saunders et al. (2016) describe these in five ways: positivism (the dominant philosophical stance of the natural scientist [ibid: 151]); critical realism (which allows a focus on the underlying structures of reality that shape the observable events [ibid: 138]); interpretivism (which relates more closely to a subjectivist philosophy [ibid: 151]); postmodernism (which relates to the 'the world-making role of language and of power relations' and 'question[s] the accepted ways of thinking and give voice to alternative world-views that have been marginalised and silenced by dominant perspectives' [ibid: 151]); and pragmatism (which can relate to improvements in the status quo, for example, the improvement of practice [ibid: 152]).

Edirisingha (2012), in contrast, claims that interpretivism and positivism are the two dominant ontological and epistemological ideologies. However, both sets of authors define these two philosophies as distinct and of contrasting positioning. For example, there is a common agreement that the knowledge acquired by the interpretivist philosophy ascribes to a social constructionist view of the world, rather than one that is objectively determined (as is the case with the positivist philosophy). More specifically, positivism in its 'purest' essence is seen as subscribing to the notion of *ONE objective* reality (ibid), which can be validated and replicated with the same result by other individuals on different occasions (Saunders et al., 2016). Interpretivism is seen as valuing multiple realities which are

relative and are subject to external influences and systems. Here the researcher is a social actor, focusing on meaning and subjective understandings of meaning. Hughes and Sharrock (1997:114) postulate that “human life is essentially different”, and suggest the adoption of an interpretivist research approach as opposed to a positivist one, since they claim that positivist research fails to give an in-depth explanation into the meanings of human experience.

Amongst the various elements that were the focus of my research, the aspect of student experience, student challenges and their understanding of life in the institutions were central. These all necessitate an interest in how students interpreted their experiences, and what meaning/s they attributed to their lives within the institutions. It was easy to eliminate the use of a positivist outlook for this research, since I knew that my study would never be about trying to obtain a *single* objective reality (due to the uniqueness [inclusive of expectations and set of life experiences] of each participant which would generate multiple realities) and could never be *totally structured and pre-planned* in nature (the uniqueness of my participants and the educational institutions themselves required flexibility in processes). It was also easy to recognise that my inclination was towards interpretivist philosophy, since my research aimed to explore students’ perceptions of their experiences, their commentary and interpretation of what was happening in their lives, which are inherently subjective, contextual, situated within a specific time, places, and national and institutional cultures.

However, I am cognisant that other philosophies, such as pragmatism and critical realism, also have played a role in my thinking. While I would reject a purist definition of pragmatism, I found some aspects of it relevant. For example, the purpose of my study was to learn about students’ challenges and experiences, so as to determine whether or not practices needed enhancement (thus relating to the improvement of status quo identified by Saunders et al, [2016: 152]). As much as this thesis hopes for radical change, I am pragmatic enough to realise that this will not arise out of a new reality, but will need to be carved out of the current context. Similarly, I found the element of critical realism relevant, because all data collected from participants needed to be seen in terms of other structural factors (for example, national policy, institutional management and the psychosocial and

financial issues that arise from these), thus pointing to the “underlying structures of reality that shape the observable events” identified by Saunders et al. (2016:138).

Lyons et al. (2011) suggest that research is inevitably also influenced by the values of the researchers and that it is possible that researchers will tend to promote or align themselves with their values within their studies (Clifford, 2005, and Pring, 2004). This implies that researchers can be inherently subjective and that these values/beliefs will inevitably colour the overall enquiry. Therefore subjectivity in the research would not only derive from the participants’ subjective views and perceptions, but also from me as a researcher (ibid).

Subjectivity though, has its advantages in a research enterprise. The personal history, values and positions that a researcher holds, and which influence/shape the research are of value for a variety of reasons. Researchers may be motivated to undertake research rooted in their experiences or politics (for example, feminist researchers) which can be used to bring about social change. When such subjectivity, arising out of acknowledged research perspectives is shared with readers, it invites them to judge the findings with this information in mind, rather than seek to provide an impossible ‘objective’ truth. This standpoint has influenced my own positioning in this study. One of the principles that grew in importance as the study progressed, was to valorise SV and to shape contemporary vocational education into a more SC enterprise. This perspective has had an impact on the writing of this thesis and in its suggestions for HVE in Malta. In addition, my own experience and knowledge about various contextual matters, as an insider in this field, has influenced the conduct of the research, particularly in managing relationships with various kinds of actors. It has also strengthened my resolve to produce research that will result in improvements in both short and longer terms for those who inhabit the fieldwork site, primarily the students, who shared their opinions and life experiences in very open ways with me.

To this effect and for reasons which I explain in subsequent sections, I opted for a case study approach with elements of ethnographic description and observations, alongside more traditional forms of data capture (survey), in an attempt to capture multiple realities and meanings of the researched topics. However, before going into the details of the research design and its implementation, I would like to discuss some key issues set out in

literature related to case study and ethnographic research, which I found particularly informative and which have helped me shape and redirect when required, my research.

An Ethnographic Approach

In the early days of the study, I was drawn to the ethnographic approach as I felt that being an insider, with a day job in one of the institutions, I had a familiarity with the organisational culture. This methodology therefore, seemed a logical way to record and collect data, since ethnography is primarily the study and explanation of human cultures (Van Maanen, 2011, and Fisher, 2010).

In earlier times, ethnographers were researchers who took a leap into the unknown to study exotic societies (Fisher 2010). Parr (2011:2) agrees with Fisher (2010) and explains that when researchers take that leap in the dark into unknown cultures, they gradually, through participant observation, familiarisation and intimacy with the environment, find their own way “in the life world under study”. Most ethnographers today no longer undertake distance traveling to conduct ethnographic study. Most ethnographies today are located in familiar locales with an emphasis on de-familiarisation as a way of gaining greater understanding about the structures and working of cultures. With the growing awareness that diversity is all around and can be found within all manner of organisations as well as within growing diversified communities (Fisher, 2010), local and insitutional/organisational ethnographies are on the rise. It still remains the case that ethnography can only be conducted by vicinity and intimacy of the realm under investigation (Bulmer, 2015). Bulmer (1984:93) ascertains that one can have ‘knowledge about’ a social realm or one can ‘become acquainted’ with a social realm. The longer the exposure within the environment, the more intimate the acquaintance and deeper the understanding of the realm.

It is worth noting however, that Preissle (1999) is not in favour of an outsider ethnographer as she asserts, that within educational ethnography most particularly, the outside ethnographer will often be rejected or silently resisted by professional educators and administrators. This is because the latter (professional educators and administrators) believe, that through their own life-long learning and academic development, the

organisation under investigation would have enough internal resources with relevant expertise and commitment to conduct investigations within their own bounded systems (ibid). Furthermore, many educators and administrators, remain of the conviction that ‘insider’ researchers have a greater stake in ensuring that the study benefits those being studied.

Ethnographic writing has been described in different ways by different academics, but the constant that remains is that ethnography is about narration. For example, White et al. (2009), in citing Van Maanen (1995), reiterate that ethnography is a story telling mechanism; for Tight (2003), ethnography is also referred to and known as auto/biographical or observational studies. White et al. (2009, in citing Van Maanen, 1995), suggest that the ethnographer in the field or in the social laboratory, draws close to the people and the events under study and then writes narrative subjective writings of experiences and regular observations (Parr, 2011), collected whilst living and working within the culture being studied (Tight, 2003). For Bulmer (1984), ethnographers usually adopt a solitary mode of working and the depth of their narratives are consistent with the narrations of super reporters. Thus the general understanding of ethnography is that the explanation and study of culture is acquired from subjective narrative writings of experiences and regular observations collected whilst living and working within the culture being studied (Parr, 2011; and Tight, 2003). This observation and writing framework of ethnography also suits studies set within educational institutions as it allows the documentation of student or staff experience within the institutional or wider social context.

According to Preissle (1999), ethnography is well established in the study of education and originated in the 20th century, a time, when the focus of academic research was predominantly and fiercely positivist in nature (research approach based on a common objective reality across individuals [Newman and Benz, 1998]). She writes, “Educational ethnography is the study of the culture of human teaching and learning as they occur in people’s ordinary daily activities” (Preissle 1999: 650). She also suggests that some of the questions that educational ethnography seeks to answer are: “What are the cultures of learning, teaching and schooling? What social organisation supports these cultures? How are they maintained and perpetuated? What is the relation between individuals and the

cultures they acquire, transmit and transform?” Such questions resonated with the interest of my own inquiry. Similarly, Troman et al. (2004:vii), assert that educational ethnography has become one of the major methods of researching, because it helps the researcher gain a better insight into the role of education in people’s lives. They claim “its [educational ethnography] key strength is its emphasis on understanding the perceptions and cultures of the people and organisations studied”.

A Case Study Approach

While I continued to explore the suitability of ethnography for my study, another very similar methodology, ‘case study’, came to attention and over time, took over as my main methodology for the research. Similar to ethnography, case study has also been subject to critique in its early days, from more positivist researchers (Tight, 2003, Denzin and Lincoln, 2003 and Yazan, 2015) but is nevertheless now, considered particularly suitable to research in-depth investigations (Tellis, 1997) which aim to provide rich data in authentic settings (White et al., 2009).

Tellis (1997) is not in agreement that case studies generate inferior research. Tellis argues that this methodology has established protocols which if used correctly, are as equally valid (and tested) as other methods used in scientific research. Stake (1994:245) too claims that “case study is part of scientific method”. Tellis (1997) also asserts that the case study approach is used successfully as a research methodology in a variety of disciplines and for different purposes. Walker (1999:93) claims that the case study approach has been a ‘key methodological development’ in educational research since the mid 1960’s. On a more ambitious note, Bassey (1999:1) promotes case study as a “prime strategy for developing educational theory”.

However, there are also disagreements between groups of academics on the positioning of case study in research. Some academics refer to case study as a ‘method’ (Zainal, 2007; Merriam, 1998); a ‘research design’/strategy/process (Yin, 2003; Saunders et al., 2016 and Tight, 2010) or a ‘methodology’ (Yazan, 2015). VanWynsberghe and Khan (2007), do not see case study as either a method, a research design nor a methodology. Instead the latter authors posit (ibid:90), that case study is a ‘transparadigmatic heuristic [process] that

enables the circumscription [definition/boundary] of the unit of analysis'. They also argue, that it is not possible for researchers to conclusively 'state the unit of analysis at the onset of the research; [as this] must come into focus as the research progresses' (ibid). This preoccupation with bounding the unit of focus seems to be a key issue for discussion, and I will return to this again very shortly.

VanWynsberghe and Khan (ibid:81) assert that at time of publishing, 'research ha[d] produced more than 25 different definitions of case study'. Some academics refer to case study, as an exploration and depiction of a setting to advance individual and social understanding of an inquiry (Cousin, 2005). Others (like Fisher, 2010) define case study as a narrative account of the subject being studied. More relevant to this thesis, however, is the interpretation given by White et al. (2009), who suggest that case studies presume the exploration and examination of particular phenomena involving real people and real situations.

Additionally, case studies have been referred to as simple, complex (Stake, 2003, Baxter and Jack, 2008) or multifaceted (Cousin, 2005). More particularly for Cousin (ibid), the multifaceted variations of case study research have the capacity to 'sophisticate the beholding' of the settings and activities that are scrutinised. According to Hammersley (1992:184), the range of variations of case studies include; "...micro to macro, all the way from an individual through a particular event, social situation, organization or institution, to a national society or international social system." Because the 'case' can stretch to such vast and diverse units of analysis, this remains an important area of discussion within the literature on case study. Norris (2002) for example, emphasises the importance of 'bounded systems' to the case study approach. He writes that defining the boundaries (be they spatial or temporal [Cousin, 2005], social, personal, purposeful or methodological [Norris, 2002]) of each case, may not be as simple as it may appear. Nevertheless, as Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) note, the use of boundaries help contain the broadness of the potential unit of analysis. A key question for the evaluation of the success of a case study has been cited as "What is this a case of?" (Stake, 2003:136).

Case studies are also categorised in different ways. Whilst Yin (2003), categorises case studies into explanatory (seeking an answer); exploratory (seeking clarity and variations of

outcomes) and descriptive (to describe a phenomenon), Cousin (2005) and Silverman (2005) in agreement with White et al. (2009), categorise them into intrinsic, instrumental and collective. Both Cousin (2005) and Silverman (2005) assert that within an intrinsic case study, there is no attempt to generalise beyond the case, whilst within an instrumental case study, the focus is to provide an insight into an issue and to revise a generalisation. They posit that researchers of a single instrumental or intrinsic case study, one can publish their case with an appeal to readers to replicate their study so that findings can be compared. Collective case studies on the other hand, aim to extend this attempt through cross-sectional investigation, to investigate a given phenomena (Silverman, 2005). In the latter category, comparison is acquired whilst new data is being generated to receive some kind of representation (Coolican, 1992). For example taking groups of students from specific age bands (or class) and comparing them at the same point. Collective case study may be linked to Parr's (2011:9) interpretation of composite case studies where one could "...weave together multiple voices into one composite portrait".

It is worth mentioning that according to Yazan (2015), case studies are approached disparately by different established research methodologists. He explores three main case study perspectives which in themselves provide researchers with a roadmap and as a whole: converge (for example in the identification of the six categorical dimensions of case study [namely, Epistemological Commitments, Defining Case and Case Study, Designing Case Study, Gathering Data, Analysing Data, and Validating Data]); diverge (for example in the definition of case and case study); and complement each other (for example, Yin complements Stake and Merriam in regards to pilot case study) in varying dimensions of case study research. More specifically Yazan (2015) claims, that at the extreme ends of a continuum, one finds Yin (2002), who suggests a total inflexible case study design structure and Stake (1995), who suggests an over flexible design structure. Merriam (1998) lies somewhere in between.

Linking the above considerations to my study, I concur with Yin (2003), that case study has been looked at from a research design perspective. This perspective contributed significantly, to the focalisation of what needed to be investigated (unit of analysis). For example, I chose to investigate aspects of student experience, particularly their needs and how well they are being met within MHVE. Therefore my research has been defined/

bounded/fenced in, by a particular location (Malta), a particular branch of education (HVE), a particular time, with a particular student population (year of research) and in two particular institutions (MCAST and ITS). It is not my intention to compare the two institutions within this case study, rather that the overall message of the findings may be able to shed light on the quality of student experience within HVE in Malta.

Tellis (1997) suggests that case studies can also serve as a method of research to establishing meaning and to give voice to powerless and voiceless. The author therefore implies that case studies (in contrast to experimental or quasi-experimental studies), if conducted appropriately, can also bring out hidden details from the view point of the participants through the use of multiple sources of data. The benefit of multiple sources of data also affects the research validation processes. In fact, my study incorporated aspects of data source triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln 2003), where there was similitude of data despite different contexts and sources (MCAST and ITS and NCFHE external audits respectively [thus external validation]). Additionally, I have also used internal validation where different internal sources of data produced similar results (online questionnaire and focus groups). The multifaceted bounded aspects of case studies as applied in this investigation on the other hand, brought about richness into the researched areas, and thus I hope, sophisticated the beholding of the investigation (Cousin, 2005), since unexpected key themes (such as lack of SV, autonomy and respect) emerged within the findings.

The previous sections described at the overlap within both ethnography and case study approaches. The next section more explicitly outlines common elements in these approaches and how these came to fit into my research study.

The Congruency of Both Approaches

According to White et al. (2009), case study appears to belong at the conservative end of the qualitative research continuum in post positivism, while ethnography can span critical theory, constructivism and participatory paradigms. However, Willis (20017) cited in White et al. (2009), claims that ethnography and case studies when used within the interpretivist framework, are more similar than dissimilar. This is because both approaches seek to acquire depth of understanding of the context they are investigating (Cousin, 2005; and Preissle, 1999).

Furthermore, ethnography and case studies have the following elements in common: a bounded setting (Pierides, 2010) which needs to be clearly defined at the earliest stages of one's research enquiry; uniqueness of enquiry (Hammersley, 1992); the leap to the unknown factor; prolonged exposure and familiarisation or defamiliarisation with the subject being investigated; the use of observations; and the flexibility in execution, related to variety of ways in which both approaches can be used.

The uniqueness of enquiry relates to the data collected and resulting findings, that can be made available for comparative purposes, but are not really replicable or easily generalisable (Coolican, 1992; and Tight, 2003). This is because the findings and their interpretation are interlinked within a specific setting and circumstances and in a given time (Ellen, 1984), by a specific researcher (or research team), which can never be identically replicated.

Literature shows that both approaches fit congruently with each other. For example, Silverman (2005) posits that both approaches do not require fixed sampling when using an interpretivist epistemology. According to Cousin (2005), this may relate to the difficulty of following a fixed plan to (say randomly) accessing participants and to the focus of the enquiry (whether it is exploratory or statistically oriented). However, Parr (2011) asserts that when adopting interpretivist epistemologies, both approaches benefit from the establishment of rapport and empathy between the researcher and research participants.

Although both approaches appeared to fit with my plans and intentions for my research, I concluded that the predominance of one approach over the other, namely the case study approach over the ethnographic approach, better suited the overall aims of my research design strategy primarily because through a combined case study, I was in a position to carry out both an exploratory study of students' experiences and needs, as well as an indirect evaluation on the current provision of educational services in the real life educational MHVE contexts.

The use of ethnographic elements (like in-depth long term observation and experience) on the other hand, complemented the case study approach, in that it provided me with a deeper understanding of both contexts. Initially I was not sure about the narrative quality

of ethnographic writing, as although I was interested in the culture of the educational institutions, this was not my primary focus. My focus was on students' perceptions about their lives within the institutions which were also impacted by the general services rendered. Therefore it would be more appropriate to describe my research as an ethnographic case study which has ultimately contributed to the provision of a detailed 'snapshot' of the MHVE System.

3.2 The Research Design

With the realisation that the two institutions varied on many factors (for example on the size of the institutions, on the student populations as well as on the provision of SS amongst other factors), I revisited the overall strategy I had started with. Since I wanted to acquire students' perspectives, experiences and opinions, I decided to take a multi-level (of data collection and analysis [Saunders et al., 2016]), bottom-up approach to the research topic. I chose not to include perspectives of staff (these have been summarised in appendix 10 d on page 256), to give more attention to students' perspectives and voices. I was also not interested in 'triangulating' the findings from students (through the use of staff perspectives for instance), as often this can involve judgments on the veracity of student opinions. I was less interested in differences between staff and student perceptions and more interested in the insights into 'meaning' in the lives of students, as related to their educational experience.

Saunders et al. (ibid:171) claim that amongst the benefits of multi-level mixed methods research, is the realisation that this approach is "both interactive and iterative, where one phase subsequently informs and directs the next phase of data collection and analysis".s I hence divided my data collection strategy into two main levels: namely a Macro level, which helped me obtain an overarching picture of the general feel of students' current needs and state of mind (and gathered opinions on the quality, accessibility and effectiveness of education and SS provided); and a Micro level whereby I solicited, explored and compared 'multiple voices' (Parr, 2011:9) in more detail. These multiple voices were acquired from diverse members of the student population: namely, male and female population; local and foreign students; 1st years and final years students; students possessing academic qualifications and students without academic qualifications; those potentially experiencing truancy; and those registered as having learning difficulties. This

helped me acquire data for cross sectional study and as Coolican (1992) argues, this also adds more value to the research, since this variety in participants provided me with further insight into the areas under investigation as well as an opportunity to investigate further, some emergent issues from the macro research.

The Sampling approach

Within the process of this study, the sampling approach and categories of samples have been modified on more than one occasion. Table 3, outlines the final one. The research instruments are discussed in the next section after the outlining of the profile of the participants of this study.

Participants of this study were approached in different ways according to the research phase of my data collection. More specifically, in the macro data collection phase (the web-based questionnaire), my sampling framework targeted all the student population found within each of the two empirical settings. In the micro data collection phase, on the other hand, participants within ITS were selected at random and entirely on voluntary basis. Originally, I had a structured sampling approach even for this data phase, but due to the timing of data collection (which was close to the end of academic year and consequent commencement of examinations period) I made a impromptu decision to facilitate matters so that I could organise the focus groups urgently.

As indicated in table 3, the grand total student participation of the online questionnaire was 265 respondents. Thirty students also participated in the focus groups held within the micro research phase. Since the online questionnaire was anonymous, I am not in a position to determine whether the participants of the focus groups were amongst same respondents of the online macro questionnaire. Summatively, the student response rate received from MCAST was less than 2% whilst the response rate received from ITS was that of 28%. This gives an overall response and participation rate of 4%.

Table 3: Final Projected Sample Framework Inclusive of Actual Students’ Participating Rates

<i>Empirical setting</i>	<i>Samples used in this research</i>	<i>Methodological Instruments Used</i>	<i>Projected number of participants</i>	<i>Number of actual participants</i>	<i>% of participants received</i>
Macro Research					
MCAST MAY 2015	ALL Full Time Students	online questionnaires	Full Time Student Population (6200) accessed via institution	100	2
ITS May 2015	ALL Full Time Students	online questionnaires and hard copy questionnaires	Full Time Student Population (591) accessed via institution	165	28
Micro Research					
ITS May 2015	Full Time Students	hard copy questionnaires semi structured focus groups	voluntary	30	n/a
MCAST MAY 2014	Full Time Students	open ended responses (to question numbers 18-22) of online questionnaires (*)	student respondents accessed via institution	n/a	n/a

(*) Appendix 8

Demographic data of participants of this research was collected in the macro phase and in the students’ focus groups of the micro phase of this research. More specifically, Part One (Question 1 to 5) of the online questionnaire collected data regarding gender, nationality, age and locality of residence of respondents as well as programmes attended. The demographic data is summarised in table 4.

Table 4 - Demographic Characteristics of the Participants of this Study

	MCAST 2015	ITS 2015
<i>Gender:</i>	%	%
Male	42.4	50.3
Female	57.6	49.7
<i>Nationality:</i>	%	%
Maltese	95.0	90.3
European National	3.0	6.7
Nationality outside the European Union	2.0	3.0
<i>Age:</i>	%	%
under 18	18.2	26.1
18 - 21	50.5	62.4
22 - 25	29.3	8.5
26 - 30	2.0	2.4
30 - 40	0	0
Over 40	0	0
other:	n/a	0.6
<i>Locality:</i>	%	%
Northern Part of Malta	23.2	24.2
Central Part of Malta	39.4	49.7
Southern Part of Malta	37.4	26.7

It is worth noting that details of the programmes undertaken by students (from one institute as in the case of ITS students), or details of student's institute affiliation (from more than one institute as in the case of MCAST), has only been collected in the macro data collection stage of this research study. The results for ITS show that there is student representation for each level of studies: namely for, the Higher National Diploma students (14% of responses); the Diploma Students (62% of responses); the Certificate students

(12% of responses); and the Foundation level students (13% of responses). The results of MCAST, on the other hand, show that there was no student representation from the Institute of Agribusiness. However, in 2014, the same institute obtained a 2% representation. Therefore, over the two macro data collection phases taken place in MCAST in 2014 and 2015 respectively, there is student representation from each of the 11 institutes. In this respect and as already indicated, the open ended responses of MCAST 2014 online questionnaire have been used when required. Percentages of MCAST institutes' representation for 2015 data collection can be viewed in appendix 7.

3.2.2 Research Instruments

I used instruments that allowed me to collect data to answer my research questions. More specifically, the instruments that were used in this research included qualitative tools such as questionnaires, semi-structured focus groups and ethnographic reflections. These instruments are discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

Questionnaires

Within the social science research field, questionnaires are very widely used as a data collection method since questionnaires are known to potentially help find answers to questions in a very systematic manner (Dornyei and Taguchi, 2010). For these authors, "... it is to a great extent the systematic handling of such small details [responses] and nuances [and relative meanings] that will eventually turn an ad hoc set of questions into an effective research instrument" (ibid:11). Therefore they solicit a well-planned use of design and layout, sequence and time (ibid).

Traditionally questionnaires were paper-based, but with the development of technology the use of web-based questionnaires has gained ground. Web-based questionnaires as opposed to the traditional paper-based questionnaires, are considered to be a cost effective method of collecting standardised data from a large number of people (Ekman et al., 2006) and the anonymous completion of these, provides an opportunity for potential respondents to express honest personal views on issues about which they may not feel comfortable talking face-to-face with an interviewer (Strange et al., 2003). Additionally, Riva et al. (2003),

posit that if sampling control and validity assessment is provided, online questionnaires can be a suitable alternative to paper-based questionnaires. Within the context of this research, an online format of this instrument was used in the macro stage of the research (please vide appendix 8), whilst a traditional paper-based format of this instrument was used for generic data collection in the micro part of the research study (appendix 9).

For the macro research I had originally considered the use of hard copy questionnaires with self-addressed pre-paid envelopes. However, this option was immediately discarded since I knew that there was a better chance of students submitting responses online rather than via traditional mail. This encouraged me to look into online questionnaires. I first looked at Survey Monkey but then opted for the Google Docs online questionnaire programme. Determining the best line of action as well as familiarisation with both programmes, was time consuming and had initially set back my forecasted work schedule. However, the time invested was recovered thanks to the analysis facility already existent within the software programme.

The online questionnaire was constructed based on both preliminary research literature about SSS as well as on the portfolio of SS provided by the empirical institution. The questionnaire was revised on more than one occasion. First the questionnaire was initially piloted by myself online and this helped me identify the necessary improvements in order to facilitate better online submission for potential participants. Subsequently, the draft was amended after receiving feedback from my academic supervisor and it was again amended after the questionnaire was piloted with three students and two adults for additional insights. Suggested amendments improved the sequence, aesthetic layout and clarity of understanding for the recipients of the questionnaire. More specifically, the original questionnaire was divided into three sections with about 19 questions in total. The review of the questionnaire saw the addition of two questions bringing the questions to a total of 21.

The final questionnaire (as can be seen in appendix 8) constituted three sections. Section 'A' included demographic information (namely: gender; age; nationality; institute attended; and year of study). Section 'B' measured the level of student satisfaction or dissatisfaction in a number of SSS provided, and section 'C' identified potential internal feelings or

emotions previously or currently still being experienced by respondents. The aim of this questionnaire was to identify students' needs and challenges, whilst identifying whether or not in students' opinion these needs were effectively addressed by HVE (the two sub-research questions presented in chapter 1).

Amongst the benefit of the online questionnaire was the fact that the students were not met face-to-face since the questionnaires were sent through institutional email lists. Therefore, students had the opportunity to be open, knowing nobody would be in a position to identify them. Also, whilst the students completed the online questionnaire, other tasks could be undertaken by myself. On the other hand, amongst the limitation of this online instrument was the fact that response rates could not be projected for any number of reasons (from the time at which the questionnaire is administered, to disinterest or dislike of topic to other time pressures that students may be facing). Furthermore, any enquiries about feedback received could not be clarified in the same way as when participants are face-to-face with the researcher.

Focus Groups

Garrison et al. (1999), in agreement with Wibeck et al. (2007), encourage the use of focus groups, since they are seen by many researchers as a very useful qualitative method. Wibeck et al. (ibid:249) argue that focus group is a research method in which a small group of participants gathers to discuss specific issues under the guidance of a moderator who could play a detached role. The strengths for utilising focus groups lie in the fact that they are “inexpensive, data rich, flexible, stimulating to participants, recall-aiding, and cumulative and elaborative (Frey and Fontana (1994), cited in Garrison et al., 1999:429). This methodology yields rich data for the researchers and can prove “comfortable for the participants, who may have little contact with the world of research and academia” (ibid: 445). This implies that focus groups have been one of the preferred research instruments, since they engage people in discussions with fewer inhibitions with (potentially) less possibility of ‘left out’ data.

Garrison et al. (ibid), in citing various academics, argue that as opposed to a structured interview that is led by the interviewer, focus groups allow participants considerable

opportunities to comment, to explain, and to share experiences and attitudes. In addition, Wibeck et al. (2007) view focus groups to be of particular value because of their ability to allow researchers to study how people engage in collective sense-making; i.e. “how views are constructed, expressed, defended and [sometimes] modified in the context of discussion and debate with others” (ibid 249).

In view of the above considerations, I decided to organise various focus groups for students to extract deeper understanding of emergent themes of the macro research held within same institution. Within ITS four semi-structured students’ focus groups were held with a total of 30 students attending on a voluntary basis. However, where possible, I ensured that all the participants attending each focus group had homogenous characteristics (for example, the same programme of studies), so as to facilitate interaction within each group on issues that may be of relevance to them as a group. No details of the groups are provided to ensure anonymity of participants.

VanderStoep (2009:27) asserts that participants volunteer when they feel they “ha[ve] a particular characteristic of interest to the project”. The majority of students who came for the focus groups all wanted to make their voices heard. This is evident in the fact that the focus groups all superseded their expected time frame. More specifically, although it was projected that each focus group lasted 60 minutes (therefore 240 minutes of projected research recording time), the four focus groups extended to 566 minutes instead. Students were very appreciative of the fact that their opinions were being sought and this appreciation was not only demonstrated through their extended presence, but also through some verbal responses. For example, on one occasion when the time allocated to the focus group was up (since students needed to go to a lesson) some students hesitated to go saying; “this is more important”, and “maybe this has an impact on ITS man!”

3.2.3 Data Analysis

For the macro research web-based questionnaire, since I used the Google Docs application, data was collected within a matrix and automatically generated quantitative summaries of responses through the use of percentages. This gave me an instantaneous, good overview of students’ positions of issues under investigation. Open-end responses (qualitative

responses) solicited in questions 18 - 22 (of the same online questionnaire) however, were extrapolated by myself onto another matrix and once categorised, the emergent themes were used as basis for further elaboration in the micro research part of this study. More specifically, I categorised responses for each institution according to four main themes (suggestions for financial support; academic support; personal/social support; and employment related support). For each theme, I used thematic coding. For example in suggestions for financial support, I incorporated the following coding: reduce study programme-based expenses; reduce prices for some student services (such as for printing, food in canteen etc.); increase stipend etc.

The analysis of the micro research phase was similar to the analysis of the open ended responses carried out in the macro analysis stage (as described above). However, this analytical process had to be preceded by the 'familiarisation of data' which is central to the understanding and interpretation of same data (Saunders et al. 2016). In agreement with latter authors, I believe that the transcription of all the student focus group sessions, helped me to immerse myself in the data and internalise and interpret more profoundly the meaning of the data. Once this process was completed, the main themes were categorised (into 2 main overarching themes, namely: Support Services and Student Challenges). Each category was then thematically coded until the finite themes were saturated and I was in a position to "...weave[d] together ... into one composite portrait" (Parr 2011:9), the main findings of both institutions.

For both the macro analysis and the micro analysis indicated above, the number of recurrences of 'unit of data' help me determine relative significance or otherwise in overall research and consequently, this helped me to determine which were the main thematic findings against the more minor ones to be included in the data chapters. Additionally, excerpts which were found to be distinct from the normative pattern of data acquired (in relation to words used, emotions or non-verbal communications witnessed in the focus groups), and which in my opinion reflected extreme emotion, reality and experience of students, these were immediately selected to be incorporated within the data chapters. Whilst I tried to provide a balanced enquiry (by also incorporating positive aspects even if some of these were provided by the minority of participants), I inevitably reflected students' overall perspectives of their experience of MHVE.

3.3 The Main Ethical Considerations

Successful and professional implementation of this research required careful evaluation and forward planning of envisaged and other emerging ethical challenges and considerations (Coolican, 1992). In agreement with Fisher (2010), I identified the following stages where varied ethical issues needed to be fully explored. These stages included: Negotiating Access; Data Collection; Data Analysis; and Reporting. These considerations and their effects on the research study are elaborated on in subsequent paragraphs.

3.3.1 Ethical Issues related to Negotiating Access

The ethical issues related to *negotiating access*, included the issue of obtaining informed consent from the gatekeepers of the institutions (Denscombe, 2002) and the possibility of negotiating terms of reference for the approval of the proposed research. The negotiating access aspect, which Saunders et al. (2016:263, 208) claim to be “critical aspects for the conduct of research” was admittedly underestimated by myself. Since I worked within ITS I thought that research access would not be an issue and that if anything, I may have found difficulty to obtain access in MCAST since to them, I was only an external researcher. I found that since I was immediately granted access at MCAST and for three years was unauthorised at my place of work, my experience contrasted significantly with Saunders et al.’s (ibid:208) assertion that as internal researchers: “...will be surrounded by numerous opportunities to pursue ... [academic] research. You are unlikely to encounter one of the most difficult hurdles that an external researcher has to overcome: that of negotiating research access”.

As already explained in the rationale section of this chapter, the negated access brought about significant increases in my workload namely; in the design of my original research strategy (when I designed the original strategy thinking that access would be granted in both institutions), the subsequent amendments to the research strategy (once access was negated within one institution), the revision of the amended strategy (once access was finally obtained within ITS) and the total resubmission of the macro research phase (the online questionnaires) this time in both empirical settings. It is worth noting that the

reintroduction of the second empirical setting (namely ITS), gave rise to another ethical issue (the 'insider status' issue); since working within the institution under investigation rendered me an internal researcher (this issue is discussed at the end of this chapter).

However, within the overall context of this study, access was required at different levels within each of the two empirical settings (first at institutional level and then at student and staff levels). Once institutional access was obtained for the macro part of my study, due to data protection issues, communication with the students was done through the respective institutions. In both instances, I was asked to provide the documentation and questionnaire link to be mailed to students and I was subsequently informed when this information was passed onto the respective student populations.

For the micro part of my study on the other hand, I was given two different directions. Within MCAST, I was asked to contact the president of the student association, whilst within ITS, I was asked to liaise directly with students. As already explained, reaching the MCAST president of students' council proved totally unsuccessful on numerous occasions and it was to compensate for this missing opportunity, that I opted to retain students' open ended feedback also from 2014's online questionnaires. This process proved to be easier within ITS as I had direct access to students, who in reading the value of the research topic, volunteered and brought over other students as additional participants to the students' focus groups.

Additionally, since the study revolved around students' perspectives, special consideration was given to the age of the participants. Within vocational institutions, the ages of students ranged from 16 years upwards. Although there was the option of excluding participants under the age of 18 years (due to consent issues), I did not find this option viable, since 16 year old participants, can equally provide significant insights (from institutional integration to change of environment issues – as they moved from secondary schools to higher vocational ones). Therefore no age restriction was set within this study. For the macro online part of the research, students under 18 years of age were asked to seek authorisation from their parent or guardian prior to completing and submitting their online responses. For the micro part of the research, all participants in the research were required to sign (or obtain their parent's or guardian's signature if under the age of 18), an informed consent

form, which was attached to a covering letter portraying the aims of the research as well as the rights of participants to withdraw at any point of the study. These guidelines were once again fully explained to participants at data collection stage, to ensure that all participants were comfortable, knowledgeable and completely willing to participate in the investigatory process.

3.3.2 Ethical Issues related to data collection, analysis and reporting

After the stage of negotiating access, ethical issues were considered in the data collection, analysis and reporting stage. Within this area, linked to my research topic we find two elements: namely deception or misinterpretation, and storage of data. These two elements are discussed in the next few paragraphs.

One can postulate, that the areas under investigation (namely the identification of student needs and their perceived educational experience), could bring about the issue of the generation of unwarranted expectations amongst participants of this study (Denscombe, 2002). To avoid these unwarranted expectations amongst students, at point of contact with all participants, I explained in a very honest way, that this research would not solve perceived ailments but at most generate awareness of their existence. Students appreciated this clarification but were still willing to contribute for two main reasons: the fact that their feedback was being formally and academically recorded and equally important, was the fact that someone was listening to them.

On the other hand, the ethical issues related to storage of data also included the issue of 'Security of Data' (ibid). In this study, all electronic data was retained within my personal computer and all raw data related documents, hard copy literature documents, notes etc., were retained at home.

Additionally, to enhance the anonymity of participants of this research focus groups, pseudonyms were attributed to quoted excerpts. Some information was also omitted where I perceived risk of identification. However, in other instances where students showed no fear of recognition and insisted for their experiences to be included in the research, I respected their opinion and included their experiences as given to me. It is

worth noting that the anonymity of the institutions could not be secured due to the national public knowledge of both higher vocational institutions. Furthermore, the areas under investigation required the naming of specific services rendered, which would easily lead one to identify the institution concerned.

3.3.3 Ethical Issues related to the Internal Researcher

My role in this study as a researcher in the two institutions as opposed to being a ‘lecturer’ in one of them (within ITS), influenced to a certain extent this research strategy and probably at subconscious level, also influenced my interaction with participants of this study. However, from the very beginning I had a very clear awareness that whilst working on this study, I was a researcher and not a lecturer and thus, had psychologically ‘geared’ myself to investigate topics at hand in the most objective possible considering. I believe that the hardest part to keep the two roles distinct was in the data analysis and interpretation stage, since students’ description of lecturers made it impossible for me not to ask myself where I might fit into their description and whether my impact on them was positive or negative. This was especially so in the data analysis of ITS due to my role of internal researcher.

Bulmer (1984) and Saunders et al. (2016) posit that although working as an internal researcher or practitioner researcher has its benefits, it remains a complex and delicate process. In agreement with these authors, I found that unlike my previous experience of working as an insider researcher within the same organisation, this empirical research proved to be a more uncomfortable experience, in relation to the interaction with colleagues and organisation alike. On reflection this aspect as well as the institutional access issue, were amongst the most challenging ethical issues encountered within this empirical research. More specifically, I was not expecting the inside researcher status to affect me to the extent that it did. It was not so much what was said about the programmes and general situation within the institution that affected me, but more the incivility, aggression and abuse fiercely alleged to have been received by so many students. The severity of these allegations, helped me observe more intently and capture more keenly, the claimed interactions within the institution.

In agreement with Van Maanen (1988:223), I concur that written observations/field notes are “secret papers to social research” which need to be used with discretion and caution. In fact since I worked within ITS and thereby had direct exposure to what went on in the institution (whilst this was not the case with MCAST), this experience has raised my understanding that as an internal researcher, although I was exposed to more comprehensive and salient observations (which in turn could have further substantiated and validated students’ claims), I could only use observations recorded in public space interactions (or private spaces used for data collection). In fact within ITS, there were many instances when I took notes and recorded abstract observations in my capacity of senior lecturer. However, I could not use them since these were recorded from private organisational interaction where prior authorisation had not been acquired from members present. This raised an ethical dilemma which I had not envisaged, in the sense that even though I did not use the material, they nevertheless influenced me and how I perceived the world within the institution, which in turn must have had a bearing on my analysis and interpretation of students’ data.

However, the realisation of my observations and my inability to act on these, over time generated intense frustration and a sense of automatic empathy with students and consequent disagreements in my interactions at work. This in partial agreement with Preissle (1999), brought about rejection and silent resistance by colleagues and administrators alike and this led me to adopt a solitary mode of working (Bulmer, 1984:1). I found this only in partial agreement with Preissle (ibid), as the latter author claims, that it is usually the outsider ethnographer (and not the inside ethnographer/researcher [as in my case]) who experiences some forms of rejection or silent resistance.

In view of the above internal related complications, although at the proposal stage of this study the issue of ‘Research Integrity’ was not projected, I felt that this issue emerged within the analysis and reporting stage of this study. I have thought about the implications of ‘producing the truth of the matter’ as given to me by students and, in spite of this, when comparing these implications to the ethical requirements of the study, as well as the commitment I gave the students to give them voice, I concluded that the ‘investigation [was not to be in anyway] influenced by considerations other than what is the truth of the matter’ (Denscombe, 2002:177). As Crow (2002) demands, none of the researched

material was intentionally omitted, mismanaged or distorted. The only circumstances whereby information was omitted was to ensure maximum protection of identity of respondents and to remain within the word count requirements of this thesis.

3.4 To conclude

This chapter explores research decisions made through this research journey and provides insights into its achievements and limitations. Whilst outlining the rationale and methodological positioning of this interpretative combined, multi-phased research case study, this chapter also puts forward the main considerations, which influenced the development, the implementation and analysis of this research. The next two chapters (chapter 4 and 5) present the main outcomes of this empirical research, the content of which is elaborated on in the discussion chapter (chapter 6).

Chapter 4

'I just wish that [Educational Institutions] understand in which position the students are and how [Educational Institutions] can make student life at least a little easier. Students have problems in their life even if they are still young, not everyone can keep up with the studies at the same rate. I wish that [Educational Institutions] can take suggestions from their students and try to help them.'

Male, MCAST

Students' Perspectives on the provision of SSS within MHVE

This chapter and the next chapter (chapter 5), present the substantive findings of this thesis. Each of these two chapters relates to a specific sub research question and contains both qualitative and quantitative data drawn from the study, as well as excerpts from ethnographic field notes collated throughout the planning, research and compilation of this thesis. Whilst the next chapter explores the main challenges faced by the current student populations in both institutions given the specific local conditions (the second sub research question), this chapter primarily focuses on the first sub research question:

- How do students experience the support that is offered to them?

More specifically, the first section of this chapter examines the SSS provided within both institutions, at the time of the data collection (April/May 2015). The latter sections focus on students' perceived effectiveness, accessibility and frequency of use of these services.

It is worth noting that in both chapters (chapter 4 and 5), excerpts drawn from the online questionnaires are indicated by students' gender, whilst excerpts drawn from the focus groups are indicated by pseudonyms.

4.1 SSS in both MHV institutions

The element of SSS was raised with all respondents of the study at both macro and micro levels. An early finding that emerged in the data collection stage of this study, showed that in addition to the significant variance in the size of the two empirical settings, the support structures found within the two main HVE institutions are unique and diverse. In this section I first enlist each support service (and role description) provided within each institution and then, I present data collected regarding students' overall satisfaction rate for the SSS as well as satisfaction rates for each individual service.

4.1.1 MCAST Support Service Structure

MCAST has a reasonable-sized SSS department which has been evolving and regenerating itself for the past 8 years. The number of staff directly working within SS at MCAST, was

approximately 66 (including full time, part time and service contract workers, but excluding members working within the Main Building Foyer Information Centre indicated in table 5). Additionally, recent developments (less than 12 months from the time of data collection), included the introduction of the 'SS coordinators' across each institute and the setting up of the students' hub right in the centre of the SSS department.

According to a staff respondent of this study, the word 'services' may be misleading because strictly speaking, even offering the curricula, the lessons and the lectures, are 'services'. But what is meant here by SSS are those services (in each faculty), that specifically fall under the umbrella of 'SSS'. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the areas (and the expected role for each area), which constitute the umbrella of the SSS department within MCAST, are included in table 5.

Students were asked if they were satisfied overall with the SSS provided. As indicated in appendix 11a, the overall satisfaction results showed that 40% of MCAST respondents were satisfied with the SSS rendered. A 34% dissatisfaction rate and a 25% 'Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied' rate was also recorded. From the overall satisfaction figure of 40%, two percent of respondents claimed that they were extremely satisfied with the SSS provided.

Students were also asked to indicate a satisfaction rate for each of the services provided. Amongst the SSS which rated highest for 'Good' and 'Excellent' (and as can be seen in appendix 11b [ii]), Career guidance (29%), Main Building Foyer Information Centre (25%) and Chaplaincy (24%) were at the top.

In contrast, those SSS which were rated highest in 'poor' and 'very poor' ranking, were the Group Activities and the Learning Support unit (11% respectively), as well as the Institute SS Coordinators (10%). Unfortunately, I was not in a position to collect a more in-depth analysis of students' opinion for these services. This is because the qualitative data acquired from ITS students' focus groups, not only provided me with a much better insight into students' experiences and perceptions about the SSS offered (as well as about the institute as a whole), but also proved critical, to the definition and elaboration of the main themes emergent from the study.

Counselling	The Counsellor supports students who go through challenging situations during their academic journey.
Chaplaincy	The Chaplain supports student in their spiritual guidance.
Career guidance	The Career Guidance unit supports students in selecting the courses and career programs which reflect one's personal aspirations.
Enrichment Groups	Students meet in groups (of up to fifteen), to discuss personal and social themes of interest to the students. The sessions are held in the presence of a counsellor and are intended to help each other and work as a team by exchanging personal experiences on selected matters.
Inclusive Education Unit	The Inclusive Education Unit provides the support to students with particular needs, including disabilities and/or learning difficulties.
Institute SS Coordinators	The Institute SS Coordinators act as a reference point in each institute for students requiring support.
Learning Support Unit	The Learning Support Unit provides academic support to students regardless of previous qualifications. In this unit, students receive support in general or specific literacy skills; in planning for assignments and course work; in developing coping and study strategies whilst tackling particular learning conditions.
L1 - L2 Courses Moderator	Level 1 and Level 2, programmes are tailored for those students who left compulsory education without obtaining enough (or any) certifications. These programmes compensate for this reality and incorporate both vocational subjects and key skills (maths, maltese and english), together with lessons in personal development and information technology.
Magic Wonders Childcare Centre	Magic Wonders Child Care Centre enables parents of young children (newborn up to three years of age) to follow educational programmes whilst their children are professionally cared for in certified childcare facilities on campus.
The Helping Skills Course and the Student-to-Student Network	Periodically counsellors organise a 30-hour training course in basic helping skills. Through this training students have the opportunity to develop communication skills, creativity, insight, ethical responsibility and other values. Following this training, the counselors invite students to participate in the Student-2-Student Network. Through this voluntary system, students are able to use the acquired helping skills to assist fellow students in need of support, in collaboration with counselors.
The Main Building Foyer Information Centre	The Information Centre provides students with information about the training programmes offered by the College's Institutes, as well as the SS available to students before and during one's studies.

(Adapted from MCAST, 2016)

In spite of this limitation, a few substantive qualitative excerpts have been included from the open ended questions included in the online questionnaires sent to MCAST students. Some personal observations and reflections about MCAST environment have also been included in appendix 10b.

Excerpt 1

WE need support... Provid[e] programmes so we can handle stress better. Having good plans and support from professionals is worth it. [More] worth than boxes of pills and therapies...Planning, Planning and planning and please, [you] need to gain feedback from students, it is extremely important, we are the ones who are being affected with the happenings! And there should be more delegation of work... few workers cannot handle all the work of the Institute...

Female, MCAST

The above excerpt has many aspects for consideration not only for the SSS unit, but also for the general administrators of the institution. Some key areas for consideration are:

- There is reference to a particular and specific need (to handle stress better).
- The *type* of support required by this student was not readily available (‘Providing programmes so we can handle stress better’). This implies that the choice of support programmes offered at the time (if any), may or may not have been, totally in line with evolving students’ needs/priorities. The statement made by the student (in agreement with Scott, 2010), that she would rather be supported by professionals in therapy rather than be supported with medication (‘Having good plans and support from professionals is worth it. [More] worth than boxes of pills and therapies...’), amplifies the kind of support requested.
- The need for greater student participation/voice is also expressed (‘...and please, [you] need to gain feedback from students, it is extremely important, we are the ones who are being affected with the happenings!’).

Considerations for the Administrators of the institution

- The excerpt also conveys a request for better institutional strategic planning in terms of resources allocation and structure ('I personally think there should be more delegation of work... Few workers cannot handle all the work of the Institute...').

Excerpt 2 and 3

I've never asked for help about this [personal and family related issues], so I am not sure what they can do. I did have a couple of issues I wanted to deal with on my own. To ask for help they would want to know every single thing and I am not one who enjoys giving out my life story to who does not really care.

Female, MCAST

They can't [help in personal and family related issues] since they don't care.

Male, MCAST

Both excerpts above, allege that within this setting, 'people/they' did 'not really care' for the emotional wellbeing of students. Excerpt 2 implies that there are privacy and trust issues that detracted this student from reaching out to the support offered.

What helped address this issue, was the recent introduction of SS coordinators who acted as a link between main campus and each respective institute. In fact, SS coordinators ranked highest for student 'once a week or more' frequency of use (11%), followed by the 'Main Building Foyer Information Centre' on main campus (which ranked 7%) and by the 'Helping Skills Course and the Student-to-Student Network' (which ranked at 6%).

Students were also asked to rate whether or not the SSS were easily accessible. The majority of responses at MCAST indicated that the services were easily accessible. For example, 50.5% stated that services were easily accessibly whilst 49.5% stated that the services were not easily accessible. The qualitative excerpts from the online questionnaire

demonstrated, that the main reason behind this discrepancy in the responses was that not all SSS were provided equally within all campuses. The majority were located in the main campus and although some services rotated across satellite campuses, students felt that they did not have the same opportunity as other students, in terms of both accessibility and frequency of service offered.

However, this initiation needs more time to embed into usual practice.

More counsellor visits at our school and be notified about this service as I have never seen one during my studies at Art and Design.

Female, MCAST

Additionally some students also noted insufficiency of services offered, as they claimed that when they tried to book a service on main campus it was fully booked.

Better counselling as when I needed to use them they were fully booked!

Female, MCAST

4.1.2 ITS Support Service Structure

Compared to MCAST, the SSS provided within ITS at the time of data collection was limited. The number of staff *directly* employed to work within support amounted to two (including full time, part time and/or service contract workers). The limited provision of a student support structure had previously emerged in my 2009 study (Thornhill, 2010). At the time, the provision of support included the services of a counsellor (working on reduced hours [30 hours a week] serving a full-time student population of 556), the facilitation of a reader during examinations for dyslexic students as well as the provision of an academic tutorial system (ibid:58). The only improvement recorded since, had been the recent introduction of a career guidance officer. On the other hand, since 2009, the services of the counsellor was now reduced by ten hours per week and was only provided in the

afternoons. There was also a complete cessation of the personal academic tutorial system. The latter tutorial system (which also had its limitations [ibid]), entitled each student to meet a tutor at least three times in an academic year to address current or potential, academic or personal issues. This meant that at the time of data collection, the students had no formal academic 'point of reference' within the institute to help. Therefore, when faced with arising problems (or cumulative problems), students felt a sense of isolation and found that they had no option but to seek guidance at the Registrar's Office. This in turn, contributed to increase the flow of student traffic at this office and inevitably augmented the strain on existing resources. According to students this also impacted significantly and most negatively, on the general disposition of the members working within this department. This will be evidenced and discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Additional SS to what is presented on the ITS website, were indicated to me by the gatekeeper of the organisation, as also forming part of the SSS provided within ITS. Table 6 lists the role of each of these services.

Table 6: The Role of each SSS provided within ITS	
Counselling	The Counsellor supports students who go through challenging situations during their academic journey.
Chaplaincy	The Chaplain is on call when required to carry out a spiritual mass within the institute.
Career guidance	The Career Guidance unit supports students in selecting the courses and career programs which reflect one's personal aspirations.
The Office of the Registrar	This office oversees a broad range of student activities from programme enquiry to student enrollment and ultimately to student graduation.
The Internship unit	The Internship unit assists, organises and monitors national and international students' industrial work placements.

(Adapted from ITS, 2016)

In the online questionnaire, students were asked to rate their 'overall' satisfaction rate with these services. Thirty nine percent of ITS respondents claimed an overall satisfaction rate (with an equal dissatisfaction rate), whilst 22% claimed to be 'neither satisfied' nor 'dissatisfied'. From the overall satisfaction rate of 39%, only 0.6% of respondents claimed to be extremely satisfied with SSS.

Students were also asked to rate each SS. The quantitative data, indicated (in appendix 11b[i]), that the highest rated SSS was the internship unit, with an overall satisfaction rate of 59% (of which 23% rated 'excellent' ranking). The next highest rated was the guidance unit (with 33%), followed by counselling (25%) and the Registrar (21%). In contrast, amongst the SSS which ranked highest in 'poor' and 'very poor' rating, was the Registrar's Office at 53%. Registrar was also the service that every respondent had had an opportunity to use.

As already indicated in the methodology chapter, within ITS, I was in the position to carry out various students' focus groups. Within these focus groups, whilst I tried to obtain a deeper insight into the negative responses of the questionnaire, I also tried to acquire a better understanding as to why students failed to use services provided. In addition to the focus groups, I also collected some personal observations and reflections. These are included in appendix 10c.

The main outcomes of the candid discussions held with students, which essentially summarised students' experiences and perceptions about the general education system and about the output of administrative services where applicable will be discussed in subsequent chapters. However, students' opinions also related to specific SS are provided in the next few paragraphs. These include career guidance, chaplaincy and counselling services.

Students' perspectives on the provision of career guidance, chaplaincy and counselling services within ITS

The information acquired about career guidance was limited, as students had more to say about the chaplaincy and the counselling services. For students, 'career guidance' was often tangled with 'counselling' as students asserted that the term 'guidance', was the term

used for counselling in their previous schools. For other students, career guidance was *only* required prior to the acceptance of students within institutions. Thus for these students, once accepted within a programme, they saw no relevance for this service. More importantly, these students did not perceive that career guidance was still relevant to them, since the academic progression from one level to another (one year to another), necessitated support and ‘guidance’ from this unit. Students also did not conceive that career guidance may help them in future employment.

Distinctions between chaplaincy and counselling services

Spiritual guidance or chaplaincy, had been viewed by students in two distinct ways. Those who were in favour of spiritual guidance and believed it should remain on offer to those individuals who sought it, because it really helped in their life:

Some people they really take religion into account, it really helps their life. There should be in my opinion [this service]. Maybe not for everyone because not everyone believes...

Lino, ITS

And those who saw no relevance to the service:

I personally am not so much ‘hekk’ [keen] on religion.

Tom, ITS

In spite of these contrasting views, students clearly differentiated between their perception of the support received from the chaplaincy and the support received from counselling. For some participants, the support received from the counsellor was professionally based ‘with years of preparation’ and intended to help an individual, whilst the support received from the chaplaincy was perceived as primarily intended to influence people to become more religious. For these students, although they claimed not to have used the services of the counsellor, they argued that they would find it easier to relate to a counsellor rather than to a priest. For students, counsellors were ‘normal’ people who had a past and could therefore relate to the challenging trajectories of a student’s journey. Students felt that

anyone wearing a priest's 'collar' was *above* normality and consequently, would potentially 'judge you'. This implied that students perceived counselling as being non-judgmental.

A counsellor ... she's just a normal person, when she was young she did whatever, you have similarities [one can relate to her]... a priest when you see him he is like a role model [students feel that they cannot compete with such an infallible model].

Tom, ITS

During the focus groups the pitfalls of labelling and stereotyping were also discussed. In a particular focus group, I asked students whether they would feel the same about me if I wore a priest robe and whether that would influence how open they would be with me. One student replied that if she did not know me, she would seek someone else.

Students concurred that some stereotyping was inevitable, but that each situation had to be viewed separately. Students claimed that it also depended on the individual and on one's ability to reach out and connect. However, students argued that even at institutional level, this ability to reach out and connect with students was not there.

Confusion over provision and role of counselling service

Some students were unaware that ITS provided counselling services. The general feel was that there was 'lack of information about it'.

I didn't even know we have counselling here... I don't know who the counsellor is. [After someone described her] ohh ... I tell her good morning every day but I don't know who she is!

Paula, ITS

This contrasted with Carlos' view that it was quite easy to learn about the counselling services, as on 'the corridor screens the services were advertised frequently'. Students also

felt that the role of counselling was ambiguous. Again this was in contrast with other students, who clearly differentiated between the role of a counsellor and other student related support officers.

In secondary school, we are used to them [counsellors] when we have a problem... when we are being bullied...we go to them.

Lino, ITS

Students asserted that it was the institute itself that sent mixed messages about the counselling role as students claimed, that it was not the first time they saw the counsellor filling administrative gaps.

[Be]cause the counsellor here I see it more of... they give her jobs to fill the gaps... [laugh] for example we had to choose a subject last semester, that we were going to take this semester and to her we had to go and give the paper, like I did not see it [as] part of a counselling job.... and that is the first time I saw her ...

Mary, ITS

Although students claimed that counselling was distant and did not reach out to them, the counsellor herself was perceived by those who had not interacted with her, as 'sweet' and 'helpful'.

The counsellor I don't think it is lack of passion or attitude ghax [as] she looks sweet... I never really spoke to her.

Jim, ITS

I think she is good ... she looks like she would want to help you...

Melanie, ITS

But for those who used counselling, the counsellor was described as supportive and understanding:

I used counselling... as a service it is good ... the miss understands you and if you tell her one thing she will continue tackling it until we have resolved it.

Carlos, ITS

However, others were totally skeptical in her abilities to make a difference as they claimed that the issues were deeply rooted within ITS.

We have a counsellor ... she will try to help but I do not think one person is going to make the difference.

Jack, ITS

Difficulties in approaching counselling services

Students claimed that since they did not feel comfortable making the first move to approach services, they would welcome students' 'reach out' programmes, whereby counselling for example, proposed itself to students rather than expecting students to reach out to counselling services. However, a 'reach out' strategy needed to be carefully worked out. Zivin et al. (2009) argue that when reaching out to students, it is important to address students' perceived needs to ensure that students, reach an awareness of their need before they are encouraged to utilise SSS.

Why doesn't she come into class or she send us emails to say 'hi I am here when you need me, give me a call, or send me an email ... why not? Reach out ... reach out programmes. I think that is really what we need - a REACH OUT PROGRAMME TO THE STUDENT. From the administration to the student.

Jim, ITS

The thing is that we youths ...we're not going to seek help, there has to be more someone that comes up to you and says: "How is life? Is it proceeding well?"

Paula, ITS

When asked to confirm or refute other students' views, that students would ridicule someone who used that approach, one participant confirmed that whilst some students would, others like her would not and therefore, such form of interaction should not be outrightly excluded. These views bring to mind universal interventions aimed at generating collective awareness in reaching out opportunities for more specific group/individualised interventions (University of South Florida, 2011; Kame'enui, 2007; Fuchs and Fuchs, 2007; Saeki et al., 2011).

If counselling went round each class and started speaking to students... if I had to say something which is worrying me, I would tell him, as this is a trained individual who knows what he should do, but I WOULD NOT go to make an appointment with the counsellor and I stay telling him what I have.

Jim, ITS

Students had different approaches to how they would use SS. Whilst the above students welcomed universal reach-out programmes as the prime option, other students like Carlos, claimed no difficulty in reaching out themselves for support. In fact, Carlos made use of the counselling services and in the past, had also approached management for support. This showed Carlos' courage in asking for help. It also showed a sense of determination in Carlos to address the issues at hand and a mature realisation that he was not in a position to resolve matters unaided.

In the induction we were urged to "come and speak" and I remembered it and I thought let me go and speak ... since I can't handle this on my own.

Carlos, ITS

Carlos asserted that support is available if searched for and that students who did not go for help were either

... 'Scared, or they don't trust [the system] or they are not looking [for help].... As I went looking and I found help'.

Carlos, ITS

This statement diverged with that of a student who claimed that his difficulty was not just at the approach stage, but also at the interaction stage with the counsellor. The student claimed that if he was reserved even with his friends (whom he encountered on a daily basis), it was less likely that he would have opened up with the counsellor whom he had never met.

Other students claimed that the issue of access was more complex, with institutional errors contributing. On enquiry, it emerged that there was a slot dedicated in their timetable for talks with counsellor. Students claimed, however, that those who enquired about the proposed sessions at the time, were told that the sessions were not being held since there had been no enthusiasm shown by the students. The students expressed their disappointment in realising that the school gave up on a good initiative *before* even trying to make it work.

It is as though [by not organising the sessions], you are pushing him aside [the student].

Tom, ITS

Some students within the focus group who agreed with Jim, stated that in spite of all possible reach out programmes, 'it is not as easy to talk about the problems you have' and it seldom happened that they opened up, 'as maybe, one finds it hard to speak to a stranger'.

Many people do not speak as they may be embarrassed of the problems they have.

Jack, ITS

Melanie: Not everybody is comfortable talking to her.

Jack: that is my point.

Phil: she is a stranger ... we do not know her.

An extract from a students' focus group, ITS

The view of not opening up with strangers was not shared by all participants. In fact, some students argued that they would rather open up with a perfect stranger.

Myself: Would you trust a stranger?

Mary: A qualified stranger? [I nodded] Yes.... If I need it! Sometimes a stranger is better than someone you know as he can give you an outside look of your life or your case.

Myself: and you think you need it sometimes?

Mary: Yes

Myself: why?

Mary: cause you can't always be inside your head and you know like if you have a problem you can't always solve it ALONE. You need help ... depends what the problem is.

An extract from a students' focus group, ITS

Others students seemed more in favour of anonymous SS. They perceived these services as being 'better', because they felt embarrassed about their problems and did not want the persons inside the institution to know about their realities.

Lack of trust

The issue of trust in the services or the evident lack of it, again emerged significantly amongst respondents. Students admitted that they were fearful to reach out these services, as many were adamant it did not pay to do so. On enquiring as to why they claimed that, the responses were that they were aware of situations, where other students sought comfort and refuge in these services and in doing so, they were disappointed to see that their issues were not only unresolved, but that the excessive and invasive interventions used, only served to augment and disseminate their original personal issues. Jack in agreement with the other students, claimed that delicate personal matters were tackled inappropriately. Students would like to see a less paternalistic and over professionalised institutional response and a more SC response (Murphy, 2011).

More specifically, students called for an improved policy of student confidentiality especially where family members were concerned. Students claimed that they had reasons for not wanting to share certain things with one's family members and that these reasons had to be respected. The main reason for not wanting to involve family members in certain personal issues, was students' informed choice not to 'worry' parents. Bearing in mind students' age range (majority between 16 to 23 years of age), there was also an implied desire of students to want to find independent ways to address certain personal issues (Santrock, 2014).

From 16 you already start knowing certain things... if in the past you used to cut your finger and you used to say ma, ma [mother, mother], I cut my fingers! At 16 I don't think you will ... you would be a little mental if you did and worry your mother sick. Therefore from the age of 16 you already try and avoid certain worries to your mother, knowing you would upset her. So... if you go and speak to an individual, it is not for that individual to inform your mother, your father and all society ... tell the police, the soldiers and get an army behind your house door!

Jack, ITS

Students claimed that from what they heard, confidentiality was not only broken with family members, but also with external public institutions namely the police force, mental hospitals, and related specialists.

That's not the problem, maybe his problem apart from being that, is that they end up getting you... about four cars behind the house? ... One goes to speak to someone, what do they do? ... They bring more problems and make one's problem even greater! Instead of helping ... doors knocking at home, and the other one is coming to help him, and the other one is coming with a psychiatrist behind the house, who wants a psychiatrist behind the door? U ejja [Come on]!

Jack, ITS

Jack explained to me that he was exaggerating it a bit when he said that one would find four cars behind the door, but he reiterated that from something small, 'they [the institute] would amplify it!'. And it is for this reason that students found alternative ways to deal with their issues. Jack reiterated that if the institutions really wanted to see an increase in use of services, there needed to be more caution and a revision of policy related to the breaching of student's confidentiality, as students turning to these services, especially solitary and young students, needed to feel secure in the knowledge that they could trust the representatives of these services and that their shared emotions would remain confidential. The need for a universal support structure is once again identified by students.

You are going to one person [the counsellor], instead of going to pay a psychiatrist who gives you pills for everyday and blows your brain more. You ... speak to her so that at the end of the day you can unburden yourself ... I don't need to talk about these things as I have friends, whom I have known for a long time. He [the friend] opens his heart and I open mine. I have the best thing. I have also my sister - I don't need these things you understand? But there are those who don't have friends or

siblings they can turn to, there would be those who have no one, so one has to see everyone.

Jack, ITS

In agreement with Jack, another student related the experience of a friend. In both excerpts, students' natural fear of medicalisation as an intervention option is made evident (Scott, 2010). Such interventions generally known to alienate people (more especially if these interventions were imposed), may also solicit defensive and hostile behaviour (ibid). According to Murphy (2011), defensive behaviour should be avoided as he posits that defensiveness, is the opposite of the authentic encounter and relational depth required for the amelioration of mental conditions.

A student went to open her heart with a counsellor and in spite of the fact that the eighteen year old student asked for full confidentiality, her parents were still informed ... [resulting in] loads of trouble! ... her mother and father, it drove them mad! Her? they drove her madder as she ended up in a mental hospital as she did certain things...

Tom, ITS

When I explained that in certain situations counsellors may have had to breach confidentiality because of the legal age of the student or the severity of the issue, the students confirmed that the student going through this ordeal, was allegedly *not* previously informed that confidentiality would be breached. Students in their attempt to exercise their agency and rights (Pizzolato, 2006), claimed that it should be a student's choice about whether parents (or other external entities for the matter), should or should not be involved (Rudd and Evans, 1998).

When asked whether they would trust the individual or whether they would be scared of getting in more trouble as some students suggested, the students said that there was always a risk of incrementing one's problems when disclosing certain issues. The student implied

that, in the case of ITS, students knew what to expect and in their efforts to avoid such consequences, they intentionally distanced themselves from the SS.

You always have that risk and it is for this reason, when I hear things like these that I do not go for counselling... Instead of pulling us towards them they are pulling us away.

Paula, ITS

The latter statement, alludes to a detachment of students from the institution as a whole (Borg and Calleja, 2006), with far-reaching implications for students' integration and sense of belonging (Tinto, 2006). This was due to accumulated perceived negative experiences resulting in a loss of credibility in the institute's integrity and trust.

What participants of the focus groups did not want to see, was the potential misuse (SS turning into a punishment, not as a complementary service to enhance ones' situation), and imposition of SS 'remedies' on students. As that, together with the breach of confidentiality identified above, made unrepairable damage (if not disintegrated altogether) to the credibility in the SS structure as a whole.

I was called to go over to school... My [relative] was shocked when she receive the phone call because the person calling didn't want to reveal any news or she didn't even know. Anyway ... we went to the meeting... I was accused of bullying and that they had seen from the cameras but they wouldn't let me see ... After accusing me, I was also forced to go to counselling sessions or else they said they'd kick me out of school if I didn't attend... All this panic got me very depressed. I didn't want to go to school or see my friends. I felt a total bully! I was accused of something I didn't do.

Lino, ITS

Such an 'imposition' or wrongful use of counselling seemed to be counter productive in this case and also undermined the standing of SS in the eyes of the student. The previous paragraphs reveal students' experiences and shared views of existing SSS. The next

section will focus on students' perceptions on the accessibility of SSS found within ITS as well as their perceived frequency of usage.

Perceived Accessibility of SSS within ITS

In terms of accessibility, students argued that the 'office hours' were tailored in accordance to the availability of the staff working within each area of support, rather than in accordance to students' needs. For example whilst students might be on campus before the first lesson of 8.30 am, some offices do not see students before 9 am ('Come later', or '[individual] is not here today, come another day') - were common responses. Other areas of support sometimes operated from noon onwards (as in the case of the counselling unit).

Students also argued that staff working within an administrative or support offices should not all avail of their leave at one go, as this limited the accessibility of the services provided. Additionally, students claimed that their time on campus was limited so it was important for them that when they reached out for these services, these were immediately made available. Students explained that in view of the way offices operated, it was not the first time that they had to leave a class, with some excuse or another, to return to the specific office to once again attempt to address their original enquiry.

Within ITS, the SSS mostly used was the Registrar's Office. Results showed that this service was used by *all* respondents. It was then followed by the internship unit (96% rate of use). Both units had a 'once a week or more' frequency of 45% and 33% respectively.

This data confirmed that students were very familiar with these services and thus, I found that their 'experience' constituted a more reliable picture than that of someone who never made use of the services. In contrast, the SSS which were used least included the Chaplaincy (with a 69% of respondents not using this service), the Counselling (with 61% not using this service) and the Career Guidance with half the respondents not having made use of the service.

On the online questionnaire (please refer to question 9 appendix 8), students were also asked to indicate frequency of use of each rated SSS. Amongst the possible responses, I have also included 'I never used this service' (like I did for question 8 ['Please rate each of

the following services provided based on YOUR own experience’]). This was also done to identify possible inconsistencies between the two identical criteria. I was hoping that if participants remained consistent in their responses, and that the percentage rate indicated for this specific criteria in question 8, would tally with the percentage rate indicated for the same criteria in question 9. Unfortunately this was not the case. However although these figures did not tally, there was similarity in ratings of unused services in ITS for Chaplaincy, counselling, internship and Registrar’s Office. Therefore, although some indication has been suggested regarding the less frequented services, this study was not in a position to claim confidently the percentages of ‘unused’ SSS within MCAST and ITS.

The previous paragraphs outline the effectiveness, the accessibility and perceived frequency of use of SSS within ITS. In the next few paragraphs I would like to explore students’ perceptions of recreational facilities within ITS.

Perceptions of recreational facilities provided within ITS

The lack of recreational facilities significantly dissatisfied ITS respondents. The institute provided the Palms canteen area, primarily to fulfil the practical training needs of the academic programmes and not to satisfy the institute’s food and beverage requirement. In fact once the scheduled practical classes in the Palms kitchen and restaurant were over, the area closed down until the next day. This left both students and staff to get snacks from on-site vending machines or to go down the town centre or to bring packed lunch from home.

You have nothing to eat, or you’re forced to go to McDonald’s or somewhere else in Bay Street, to eat something cause the vending machines - all they have is packets and sweets so literally you’re forced to eat... I mean the canteen should either be open [elevation of voice] or there should be something!

Elvis, ITS

Students complained about the lack of things to do in one’s break or free time and the lack of space for recreation. In their free time, students used the small sitting area in the atrium (main entrance of the campus) but even here, due to the central location of this sitting area

and close proximity to the directors' offices, students' behaviour was monitored (via cameras) from afar and often 'muzzled' (that is, students were approached and requested to stop displaying certain type of behaviour), when found to be excessively loud or inappropriate. This forced students to go into town and spend what little money they had.

ITS needs to have a student leisure area. One of the major problems is that when we have free lessons and you live far away, it's not worth it to go home... you have absolutely nothing to do here at ITS. You just sit around and you can't do anything. Some people end up going to McDonald's.

When the size of the institute (the limitation of the psychical structure) was brought to the students' attention, students argued that it was not a matter of 'limited' space, as they believed space was available, but the willingness of the institution to develop these spaces for students was simply not there.

Space is not limited in the sense that we have a lot of space where to potentially do things, but things are not developing, or they are leaving them empty.

Jim, ITS

But it still should have its [leisure] space regardless of how many people even if it had 2 people only!

Mary, ITS

The lack of recreational facilities impacted negatively on students' social, economic and emotional wellness (Cefai, Cooper and Camilleri, 2008). Students wanting to interact, 'hang out' with fellow learners but felt they were not 'allowed' to. This solicited hostile behaviour in some students as indicated in the extract below.

'Certain attitude I see it from myself... it changes because I would have 4 hours free, how can one NOT go crazy? Is it not obvious that I come demotivated for this lesson after I hang

around 4 hours down there?... What am I expected to do in those 4 hours? Am I going home and come back again? I would be crazy! Come on! ... The money this school is costing me! I would be hungry at one, BUT canteen is closed... what am I going to eat? Vending machines? What am I going to do with those? [Heart felt outburst which was evident in the redness of his face and loudness of his voice].’

Tom, ITS

Students also questioned the quality of service provided by the Palms canteen area. More specifically, students related recent diminishment in food portion sizes (and the retainment of prices). Melanie and her friends gave a humorous description of their experience.

Melanie: The price is the same and he gives you a very small portion ... before it was worth it as he used to fill plate up but now, you go and almost everything is already finished!

Laura: I complain more about the fact that the food finishes early.

Mary: the problem is that the break is from 12.30 to 13.00. If you go at noon, the food is finished. And if you are starving you're screwed!

Jim: Yesterday at 11.30 am the food was ALL finished! A plate of pasta ... you know what was left of the pasta? [And made a sign to indicate a little]

Mary: a ladle full!

Jim: literally a ladle full.... 2 euros for a portion like that...

Myself: what are you suggesting?

Mary: If the canteen hours are from 12.30 to 13.00 you should put them at that hour and not serve food before. If students have free lessons they will eat everything so more portions are needed... They should offer breakfast... canteen at junior college was open from 7 hrs till 1800 hrs. School hours however, were from 8 hrs till 17.00 hrs, so people who did not bring food from home can eat from the canteen.

An extract from a students' focus group, ITS

Another student mentioned that due to health choices and possibly food allergies, not all students could eat food from the canteen. This student remarked that some vegetarian food was sometimes provided on request. In view of these realities, some students explained that if they had no time to go to the town centre, they preferred purchasing food from a mobile van sited outside the school. When I remarked that the food there was possibly unhealthy, Mary bluntly, and most immediately remarked:

Mary: What's healthy here?... The chips taste like a stone full of oil!

Jim: and they put salt and pepper themselves and they are not supposed to.

Mary: Maybe you have high blood pressure? And they put 3 kilos salt!!

Jim: They're not supposed to add salt and pepper

An extract from a students' focus group, ITS

Although the above group of students were dissatisfied with the general provision of food and recreational facilities, they laughed about it and seemed to 'accept it' or rather, they seemed to have learned how to cope with it. However, not all reactions were as balanced.

Some students felt extremely angry and claimed that ITS, was not adapting to students' needs and in the process of expecting students to fit into the established system, was demonstrating lack of respect and interest in student welfare.

I see the institute as ALMOST a prison... The FACT that when you have free lessons all you can do is stay outside ... There is nothing to do in this institute... The canteen is not open! Facebook is blocked! Games room there is none. Wi-Fi is blocked!...

Tom, ITS

ITS is not adapting to the student population... you have students who have nowhere to sit, they have nowhere to eat. Everybody has to stay in and there is no place... space is very limited and that is why you have many students complaining that they want a games room.

Jim, ITS

4.2 To conclude

4.2.1 Findings from MCAST

MCAST has an established SS department which is continuously developing. Forty percent of respondents expressed an overall satisfaction rate with the SS provided. The perceived lack of care and 'overly' clinical approach to students' issues, discouraged some students from reaching out and trusting the support system offered.

The accessibility of services received almost equal contrasting views. Primarily this was due to the fact that the provision of SSS was based in the main campus with satellite campuses receiving a more limited provision of SS. However, the introduction of the supports coordinator helped lessen this issue. Students argued for better institutional strategic planning, in terms of resources allocation and structure. Respondents of this

study implied that through collaborative SV frameworks, not only would the provision of SSS be readily enhanced but also support service utilisation rates would improve.

4.2.2 Findings from ITS

ITS did not have an established SS department and members working directly within SS were limited. Students felt the provision of services was distant, ambiguous and in some cases also unknown to students. Students argued that services were not as accessible as they hoped for, primarily because they claimed that the structure and provision of these services, were administrative-centred and not SC.

Students had different approaches to the utilisation of SS. Whilst some students welcomed reach-out programmes as the prime instigator to acquaint oneself with SSS, other students found no difficulty in reaching out to the SSS provided. Students showed interest in preventative universal support interventions aimed at generating group or individual interest in reaching out for more specific individualised preventative or reactive support interventions. However, students claimed that this could only work if confidentiality was honoured by the institution.

The focus groups in fact revealed that students did not trust the support system. This resulted in student detachment. Students claimed that when other students sought comfort and refuge in these services, they were disappointed to see that their issues were not only unresolved, but excessively and invasively addressed.

The poor recreational facilities significantly disappointed students. Students argued that they did not have their space and the little space they had, was monitored. This limitation impacted very negatively on students' social, economic and emotional wellness. Students asserted that their views had been made known, but nothing was ever done in this regard as students claim, the willingness of the institution to develop spaces for students was simply not there.

The overall findings of this chapter determine the effectiveness, accessibility and frequency of usage of SSS provided within both MHVE institutions. However, in exploring the analysis of all responses, my research broadened out in very rich ways to

understand that both institutions needed to become far more SC, not just through the provision of SS services, but more fundamentally change how they viewed their students and their needs and incorporate this into the ethos of both institutions. Students felt that the educational system was not adapting to their needs but expecting them to fit into the established system. For students this demonstrated lack of respect and interest in student welfare. These issues will be drawn out in the next chapter, through the exploration of students' challenges and needs.

Chapter 5

‘There is no sympathy from their side there isn’t. Just they are here and they happen to be doing this job where there happen to be students ... when they can be working elsewhere more or less quieter ...’

Laura, ITS

Challenges faced by Students

While the previous chapter explored the perception and provision of SSS within the two institutions, this chapter targets the second sub research question namely:

- What are the challenges/needs of students attending MHVE?

The data shows that the main challenges faced by participants of this study included: academic, financial and emotional issues. ‘Navigating’ the institutions was an emergent challenge. Each of these challenges are sequentially discussed in this chapter.

5.1 Academic challenges faced by students

In response to the question about the key challenges that students faced at the time of data collection, the one relating to academic work was cited as the biggest challenge faced by respondents. In fact, 65% of the overall responses from both institutions, claimed that academic challenges were a significant reality. More specifically, and as indicated in appendix 12, MCAST students claimed to struggle more with the academic aspect of their educational journey (71%) compared to ITS students (59%).

This section will therefore explore, what in students’ opinions constituted the main reasons behind their academic challenges. Three key themes were: a) structure, content and quality of curriculum offered; b) poor structure and organisation of assessment practices; and c) unmet learning needs. The first part of this section explores these issues. The section also incorporates students’ views on how they expect MHVE institutions to consistently react to these needs, to ensure a high level of student engagement, retention and academic learning. Students’ perceptions of their relationship with academic staff is also provided at the end of this section.

Structure, Content and Quality of the Curriculum

Students claimed that in their experience, the programmes' structure lacked a systematic progression. Some students in fact argued that the programmes were not effective and were not meeting their expectations. This emerged across all the focus groups.

We are going abroad next year [for compulsory international internship] and to be honest I haven't learned anything out of the ordinary at ITS. I'm not saying it's their fault or anything but we need to be prepared for our future career, not learning Maltese history in depth or going into English Hospitality (module) which all we did Carnival and Halloween!

Male, ITS

Students from both institutions asserted that within each area of specialisation, the programmes of study incorporated repetitive and irrelevant material. This was a recurring concern amongst respondents and it was evident that it caused great discontent. The fact that the repetition of content was not only amongst their own modules but also across different levels of education (such as the foundation and diploma courses in this case narrated in Laura's extract below), suggested to them that the quality control of their programmes was lacking. The following data collected from both the online surveys as well as the focus groups illustrate these claims.

By revising the units of each course and not repeating them throughout the years... In one particular year we had health and safety as a particular unit, the following year we had it all over again, doing the same syllabus just slightly different with almost the same assignment... It's a waste of time ...

Female, MCAST

Laura: Our kitchen and larder theory which is in diploma level first semester, is like the foundation second year. I saw [name of

student] myself doing the essays and he is second year foundation. So poor guy, he is in second year foundation for nothing, as he is doing the same things that we are doing in diploma!

Jack: therefore from the certificate I could have progressed to higher national diploma!

Phil: last year in the certificate, I was with students who attended foundation. They used to tell me “repetition!”. This year in diploma we had repetition in diploma ... they had enough and left ... about 5 left.

Jack: The kitchen, first semester, I GOT FED UP. EVERYTHING BASIC THAT I DID TWO YEARS AGO! ... YOU KNOW WHAT DEPRESSION I HAD IN CLASS!?! I used to sleep ...

An extract from an ITS focus group

Many students urged the removal of what they considered to be unrelated subjects in each area (and year) of study. When we discussed what could be done about this, they suggested:

To improve such courses, since they contain subjects which are not suitable or related to the work that a particular student will be working in.

Male, MCAST

Make the courses more interesting and remove those ‘nonsense’ and ‘there-for-nothing’ units that you completely learn nothing from.

Male, MCAST

Mary: I don't get the sense why we have IT and we do Photoshop when we could use that lesson for Opera [a computer system used

in hospitality]... when are we ever going to use a Photoshop application or a gif application [in our of work] or do a music video? ... Okay maybe I will use it for something but I am not going to use it for work. I do not think it is completely useless but for our course it is. There are other things we could have done.

Jim: ... environmental and IT, they are useless in our course. For example with IT we could have started learning Opera ...

Mary: we are going into a job for summer and we don't have a clue about what we are supposed to do except theory [non application based content]... which we won't need.

An extract from an ITS focus group

The problem of too little time for relevant content

It was clear that students felt, that being on a vocational course led them to expect relevant, practical and usable knowledge (not too heavily texted and theoretically based) in areas related to their main course.

About the many irrelevant subjects... waitering all right, I believe that we need to do it, because if in future we will become head chefs, communication with the service brigade is needed. You need to know what his job entails ... so that you know the pressures they have and vice versa, so that we understand each other... Let's take Maltese culture. I had friends who at the moment are abroad (carrying out their compulsory international internship)... They told me that in the lesson on 'Maltese culture', they covered Maltese food, Maltese gastronomy, how they produced Maltese cheese let's say... How is it now, all of a sudden, we are not covering same Maltese culture? We now do history, as in 'when did the Phoenicians come, how did Dracut die?' Now as chefs, who is

EVER going to come and ask us how Dracut died? If we are going to be in the kitchen, all right there will be interaction with customers, but on food — they may ask what is this Maltese dish? Not when the knights came to Malta, the Carthaginians, when we were under the Arabs. What have these got to do with our programme?

Health and safety I understand it ... as in the kitchen you need to maintain the safety of the employee and the others... If I know nothing about health and safety and I hurt him [pointing to a colleague] and let's say, he passes out... how am I going to handle it if I know nothing about health and safety? This okay I agree with it and service and that, but there are some subjects... [we need more than others]. For example why they removed butchery? ... Why should we not get the knowledge other students [from previous years] got? ... Let us say from a cost point of view he [management] is better off getting you half a cow and you cut it, rather than him getting you the cuts ready as you are paying more for convenience...

Lino, ITS

Students claimed that in their time in the institution and through their interactions with past students, they had witnessed a deterioration in the curriculum within ITS in particular. Students felt that together with the deletion and irrelevance of some content, they were also experiencing 'compressed' material in areas which they felt, deserved much more detailed elaboration.

Jack: [This year] THEY MANAGED in 7 weeks and another 7 weeks TO COMPRESS EVERYTHING into a mumble jumble ... me in puff pastry the first year I learnt it, but I forgot it... but this time, many things have not been explained. For example 'petite fours' for Pembroke suite [the internal public restaurant] I do not know how to do them ... and they never taught us.

Myself: so if I am understanding correctly ... repetition of content from two years ago is still here, but they compressed new content so the student is still not understanding, am I understanding you correctly?

Students as a group: yes

Jack: In the certificate [programme of studies] we had kitchen and subjects all related with the industry and with the kitchen... Larder and pastry we had done them theory and practical, and practical we did not do say three hours and that is it. We used to have THREE lessons of practical in a week. We used to have individual, the restaurant and the pastry. ...We did not get bored. Then after we finished we used to have a lesson that CONTINUES TO EMPHASISE on what we did.

An extract from an ITS focus group

Students from MCAST also shared similar views

More classes on certain units. Some units do not have enough hours to work on.

Female, MCAST

Poor skills and competency development

Students collectively argued that if the irrelevant and repetitive content were removed, this could make way for the compressed topics, which in their opinion, required further insight and exploration. Jack argued that certain areas were no longer dealt with in the same detail and with the same care for appropriateness of content as in the past. Perhaps most seriously of all, students stated that in their experience, they were acquiring low skill and low competency development in the main technical areas of selected programmes. If what students asserted is even partially true, this would be in contrast with guidelines issued by the NCFHE ([2016:15, 64 respectively] “the quality of teaching and learning has to be

maintained”; “ensure the use of appropriate measures as a means of improving the quality of teaching, learning, training and research”).

It's a shame to say I'm getting a degree in fine arts with no good knowledge to draw figures ...

Female, MCAST

I consider my school to give students bunch of work to do with no time to experiment and no time to make mistakes to at least learn from them. It's not academic AT ALL. ... When we complained about this, they told us that it's the student's job to learn this at home. If so, why study in a what's so called 'a school' and not stay at home doing what I love to do at my own time? Why should I pay for someone [privately] to teach me the subject [within the art and design programme] I'm supposed to study at school? It's truly a shame!

Female, MCAST

Mary: we need more practicals to actually know what we are doing... we also need to know theory obviously..

Jim: but we need to know the practical as well.

Mary: we have 12 subjects and the whole course is based on Front Office mainly ... we have one lesson [1 hour] of Front Office and we have two hours of CRM [customer relations management].

An extract from an ITS focus group

Students from ITS, for example, felt that they were learning *more* from their part-time work in the hospitality industry, than they were learning within the educational establishment. This impacted negatively their credibility at work, since they were expected to have mastered certain aspects of the vocation.

At work they tell me do this and ... all the time I ask for help. They tell me “you don’t learn [that] at school? ... If I learn more from work than from school, not there I go and earn something from it? ([sic] it is natural for me to go to work since I learn more there, whilst at the same time, earn money for it...)

Melanie, ITS

I'm not lying when I say that in an 8 hour shift at work, I learn more than a whole semester at ITS because practice [in ITS] is not given as it should'

Ramona, ITS

The issue of constant and radical change to curriculum and academic practice

Apart from the perceived poor quality of the curriculum (which was to a certain extent, also implied in the external audit report of ITS (NCFHE, 2016 [standard 1, 3 and 4]), students also felt the curriculum was unstable and sometimes did not adhere to the advertised outline of studies. The following extracts are an example of these claims. Students here were asked about what they thought of the new curriculum being designed:

Claude: I think that's going to be a bigger problem.

Myself: why?

Claude: cause the system has already changed. I understand that it was hard for the system to be implemented, but since it is implemented and it is working, why break the new system? why?

Cindy: you can't keep changing... they already changed last year.

Claude: improving the system yes, but not changing it completely

Cindy: The more you change the more everyone is gonna get confused.

Claude: This is the biggest problem... there is too much change... once you change you have to stick to that change and improve upon it not change it again.

An extract from a students' focus group at ITS

In the above extract, Cindy and Claude's concern about additional changes is made evident. Their perception was, that many changes had already been made both at curriculum (the international exposure was reduced to 6 months from 12 months, the foundation course was reduced from 3 years to 1 year) and at organisational level (3 different Executive Directors in less than one year, removal of registrar, transferring of staff from one department to another et.). What both students could not condone, was not the trail of new Executive Directors, but that none of the latter individuals continued working on the vision of predecessors.

Other participants who shared these views, suggested the use of some form of impact assessment of these changes on the student population and their related programme of studies.

This is what I cannot understand... we are meant to have languages [to also understand culinary terms from other cultures], I never had a language in this school. I have been here 2 years and I never had a language ... A language is important ... now if they say that in ITS you should have a language, you ARE meant to have the language! Those who were here before me, 2 years before me, had Italian, Spanish, French and Maltese [culinary terms] ... me not even one language I have...

Melanie, ITS

The above extracts portray critical views of students. On the one hand, students wanted change in the curriculum (as they felt that they were missing out on subjects previous students used to benefit from), but on the other hand, students were suspicious of persistent changes experienced within ITS. The students asked for change that was relevant and not change for the worse.

Claude: The biggest problem is [the] changing in top management. One after the other, it doesn't make any sense ... AT ALL! Keep the same staff [management] cause if I am working on something [like a strategic plan and its implementation], I know what this something is, I know it by heart. Now if someone new replaces me giving him a hand over is not enough!

Cindy: ...This other person goes to another section [changes taking place between administrative staff] ... some of them are like 'she is showing him... give us a second'. Training should not be given during work when people need to come and ask questions ... students need to go to lessons and can't wait. So students end up going back and forth.

An extract from students' focus group at ITS

In the above extract, Cindy and Claude implied that they witnessed constant upheaval and changes in the institution and subsequently in the programmes of studies, which in their opinion did not result in any improvements. Therefore, both students were adamant that they did not want to see more changes. They argued that what appeared to have brought about constant change within the institution, were the changes within the top management. In the 14 months prior to the study, ITS had had four different Executive directors or the equivalent. With each change of management (as also implied in the external audit of ITS [NCFHE, 2016]), students felt there had been significant changes to the curriculum, alongside with ongoing revision of related institutional practices and services. Some students who had been subjected to various changes in curricula stated that there had been

incessant ‘big’ changes since 2012, leaving its community inclusive of students, feeling unsettled, helpless and with an unclear sense of direction and scope.

... Every year there is a big change... one year you need to go abroad 6 months [for the compulsory international internship], the next year they changed it to 12 months. The following year, they do that 47-50 thing [the change in passmark from 50 down to 47]... ALWAYS something changing there is *NO* consistency!

Melanie, ITS

Perception of broken promises

Students from MCAST have also expressed disappointments with their institution. Students implied that they felt cheated since they claimed that MCAST failed to honour certain promises made to them, either prior to their entry to the institution or during the running of the academic programmes.

Last semester they FORCED us to frame our work for an exhibition while promising us to refund us as soon as they get the sponsor. We never got the money which is not fair, because they promised us and we trusted them.

Female, MCAST

If you had guaranteed us that you are going to offer us an apprenticeship programme, next time keep the promise!

Male, MCAST

It's not fair for a student [Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineering] that finished his degree and still lacks a warrant, which he/she studied for, like any other student at the university.

Male, MCAST

This last student's views suggest that in spite of national claims of parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications (Referencing Report, 2016), the reality

was that there was no factual parity of esteem, because some students who graduated from the University of Malta acquired a warrant as part of their qualification package, whilst the same programme of studies held within MCAST, did not incorporate a warrant as part of the qualification package. Another student expressed a similar concern:

One of the reasons I applied at MCAST is that they said they will help us find a job. To date no one did and I do not think that any one will... Just 2 months more to finish and nothing, not a single word... what am I going to be when I graduate [Institute of Building and Construction Engineering]? I'm not a Perit [Architect] and although the course says construction engineer we are not really engineers are we? No warrant and the like!

Female, MCAST

The above student felt, that she was promised something [namely a job and a career], which had not materialised at time of data collection. More specifically, she implied that the qualification she was working towards, was not even recognised by the profession and that this made her feel disillusioned and misled. This view was not shared by all students. One respondent argued that it was up to the student to find the desired job and the successful acquisition of this, was entirely dependent on the effort put in by the student pursuing this goal.

Those who don't get the desired job after completing studies can only mean one thing: the student didn't work enough (during and after studies - if the job is a goal), hence, he/she doesn't deserve it.

Male, MCAST

Such different views point to the diversity of the student body and its expectations. However, while disagreements occasionally emerged between students, overall, there was far more unity in their critique of their institutions.

Assessment processes and structure:

Another aspect of academic life that students found challenging was the assessment methodology used within MHVE. In general terms, the assessments criteria included three elements: students attendance; coursework assessments; and examinations. Student feedback on each are presented in the following sections.

Students felt the mandatory attendance of 80 % was no longer viable for different reasons. Some felt they worked better at home and others felt they studied at different times of the day, depending on their commitments (health or work related) and that attendance should be left to students' choice.

Adding the 80% of attendance quota per each unit has made it quite harder. I am a student that works better when I'm quiet, my ideas flow easier. But being restricted with the 80% is unfair. As long as we hand in all the work necessary we should not be forced where we can work from.

Female, MCAST

What mattered for students, was that they passed the examination and other assessments and not that they scored a percentage of attended sessions. For many, physical presence in class correlated less with high grades, as they saw themselves as capable of independent, self-directed learning, with the ability to manage their time as they saw fit. This issue appears to have been formally addressed at European level in the communication of the European Commission (2012:7). In this communication, it is argued that education and training is effective when the focus is on acquired learning outcomes and *not* on time spent in school. One practical implication of this innovative stance, is that it would significantly enhance student autonomy in relation to 'attendance'.

Students also spoke about the way assignments were distributed across the year. They claimed that this distribution was significantly unstructured, as many found themselves with periods of excessive work and other periods with no assignments at all. The clustering of coursework deadlines caused a great deal of discontent.

Time management of school work is horrible! Till December we barely have any work to do... And then everything is crumbled at June... Thesis proposal should be done over the summer... so we can start early on the thesis and not given out in December ... Good work cannot be done in 5 months and 2 weeks ...

Female, MCAST

ITS can support us by not giving us a lot of assignments and presentations until one week before the exams especially with 13 different subjects to study for!!

Student, ITS

MCAST should plan the assignments as all assignments come at the same time... in one month a student will have about 8 or 9 assignments or TCA [time constraint assessments] to do.

Student, MCAST

It is clear that these students expect assignment deadlines to be staggered throughout the academic year. The NCFHE audit report captured this too when it claimed that there appeared to be ‘no comprehensive study plan[s] for any of the educational programmes ... placed at the disposal of students’ (NCFHE, 2016:9).

Students additionally felt that some of the assessments had no purpose and were given just for the sake of having an assignment. Students wanted to see assessments which are relevant to their line of work.

Some of my assignments and course years have been bizarrely put together, seemingly by people with no background in the

contemporary fine art scene/industry and in a nonsensical way that needs reworking, to best benefit the students rather than satisfy the criteria set by the campus administration (who have no proper background in the education of the arts and creative media).

Male, MCAST

It is very useful to do research at home rather than writing long essays which don't make any sense ... or they are out of the subject.

Female, ITS

The notion of setting out clear learning goals for each module and tying assessments to these learning objectives seems not to be in practice. It is also clear that there is little communication between lecturers and students about why certain assessments were in place and what these intended to achieve. Students suggested that in addition to a balanced distribution and improved relevance of assessments, a form of assessments briefing was needed to communicate the educational reasons behind them. Another request was to receive feedback about the coursework and results in a timely manner. For example students claimed that they received the results of exams carried out in semester one (January), at summer time (July).

I think it can improve ... by trying to put themselves in our shoes. WE WANT TO KNOW, we want to know. When the exams are... when the results are coming out... it is not justifiable that our exams... the ones that we just did...[in January]... we never received a letter at home telling us... you have passed this, this and this.... I don't have anything to show that I have done 5 exams ... nothing! [referring to the exam result list which only reaches students after the end of the whole academic year]

Claude, ITS

Students also spoke of a lax attitude by some lecturers when it came to handing out assignments:

Lecturers don't even correct the assignments on time. Ahjar jibdew minn hemm! [It's best if they start from there!] In the 1st semester we did 2 assignments and an exam of which we are still waiting the feedback [This research was carried out towards the end of the 2nd semester]...

Female, MCAST

Fairness in assessment process (inclusive of criteria and markings) attributed to each programme of studies has also emerged as a requirement in this study.

Be fair on the grades. If one gets 2 merits and a distinction, the final mark should be a merit but if you get 2 merits and a pass, the final mark shouldn't be a pass it should be a merit!

Female, MCAST

Most students fail from assignments because of the [rigidity of the assessment] criteria, as they know most of the questions, but if one fails a required question, he/she's failed.

Student, MCAST

Mary: The CRM [the name of a module] is a level 5 module [students are undertaking a level 4 course]... because we have HND [level 5] students with us and we have Erasmus [students]... we are all together. We were told that the test and the exam [for this module] is going to be between a level 4 and a level 5, so it is going to be hard[er] for us and it is going to be easier for them.

Lila: I don't see it making sense.

Mary: we won't have multiple choice, we won't have fill in the blanks, it's just going to be case studies and essays.

An extract from a students' focus group at ITS

In the above extract, it appeared, that whilst the level 5 students were being advantaged to a certain extent (as they were being assessed on a lower level than what was expected of them), the level 4 students were disadvantaged, as they were being assessed at a slight higher level than what was expected of them. The fact that assessments were not differentiated between the different sets of students on different awards was resented by them. Furthermore, it appeared that the module, should have been given to the students *after* the students acquired the 'guest relations' module and not concurrently to it, as it turned out. The implication of these complaints signified that there was a fear of failing as well as significant problems within the curriculum related to assessment procedures, workload distribution, quality assurance and progression issues from one set of awards to another.

The element of 'failing' or rather, the 'fear of failing', has come up quite a lot in the focus groups. Often this was linked to situations beyond the control of the student (like ill health), which due to existing regulations (for example, attendance requirements), hindered students.

Lino: For me in this school, there is a lot of pressure on the student... if you don't do an assignment you fail, if you don't do a test you fail, if you don't attend so many sessions you fail... like [mentioned a name of a student] what do you mean if you have that situation of hospital constraints, you fail? Let's leave attendance due to 'qsies' [show off behaviour], they fail ok. But there are some genuine situations. They should do the exams and if they pass, they pass. Maybe they would have studied, made their utmost... But not make them fail a year [as a consequence of their lack of attendance]! ... I am mentioning [named a student] as I know [this student], is a person that studies a lot. Why should [student] BE MADE to fail?

Because of a medical reason? Health comes first. They SHOULD understand you.

Myself: Don't you think you will face the same pressures in the work environment?

Lino: In the work environment they will understand you, I imagine. At work, if you injure yourself they would not kick you out... not like over here.

[The students as a group explained that when someone is in that situation, the school should not be pushing one 'further down,' as it is at that time, when students need support and understanding.]

An extract from students' focus group at ITS

We need better understanding of student's enquiries and problems. Certain scholastic rules make no sense what so ever! ... Recently I had a problem with a subject regarding a merit grade. BTEC [Business and Technology Education Council] and MCAST have a rule regarding exams, where a merit or distinction task must be seriously attempted for the student to have a resit if he fails. I had a class exam. I passed all the criteria with complete correct answers except one merit task, for the simple reason that I knew I did not know the question so rather than writing complete nonsense so I can do a resit, I left it empty. I did not leave it empty through lack of interest or just to be lazy. So I was not allowed to re attempt the exam like the students who failed other criteria and wrote nonsense. I ruined a subject and got my first Pass instead of distinction. When I spoke with administration I was told that this was a BTEC regulation and that MCAST could do nothing. As an MCAST student MCAST should have stood up for me and at least got my case evaluated before simply saying no.

Male, MCAST

Like the mandatory 80% attendance, this was another area where students felt the regulations no longer made sense within the context of their lives. Students solicit organic approaches to regulations not mechanistic ones (Daft, 2012). The previous paragraphs portray students' concerns about academic challenges they faced, as a result of what they consider to be unstructured, irrelevant and inflexible curricula and assessment processes. The next section explores students' academic needs from the perspective of those who claim special learning needs and difficulties.

Unmet learning needs of students with learning difficulties

Respondents from both institutions expressed their view about the acclaimed provision of academic support in each institution and concluded, that the provisions were inadequate to their individual learning needs. The following extract reveals how a student's ADHD and dyslexia needs were not met by the institution.

I am ADHD and Dyslexic so being in class is vary [very] demanding of me, so I have two options:

1) I go and disturb the class (because as an ADHD I can't sit still), and then I go home exosted [exhausted] and dippresed [depressed] and try but fail miserably at doing my assignment. (and obviously as a dyslexic it will take me long, like it took me half an hour to wright this to remove the spelling mistakes) Or 2) I can skip school and take my time with the assignments and actually do good for once... I mean I know this is a shocker for some of you guys but some of your students are smart enough to understand basic chemistry ON THERE [their] OWN ... I don't need to be in a class for two hours while the other students understand what I got in 15 min. I mean in one lesson I was so bored I actually ended up taking a course in quantum entanglements.

Male, MCAST

This experience unveils the diversity and simultaneity of impairments found within one individual and possibly also found amongst the rest of the student population. From the selection of words used and the resulting implied tone of these, it was evident, that the student expected the institution to cater for his unique learning needs (thus personalisation of learning identified in chapter 2). The student rightly claimed (in view of the mission statement set by MCAST "To provide universally accessible vocational and professional education and training with an international dimension, responsive to the needs of the individual and the economy"), that his learning needs were totally ignored due to a one-size-fits all system structure.

Although at face value being diagnosed with a learning difficulty may imply negative connotations, it is argued that one should also consider the positive implications of any diagnosis (Riddick, 2009). Riddick posits that amongst the advantages, one finds that individuals diagnosed with a learning difficulty were potentially no longer easily labelled 'lazy' or 'stupid' (ibid). Students in ITS, however, felt that there were few benefits in exposing one's learning difficulty to the institution and claimed that nothing was done about their condition. Rob, a dyslexic student shared his experience whilst he claimed that he had informed the institute about his learning difficulty and the administrative representatives had requested proof (which to obtain incurred Rob and his parents, time and financial expense), only to realise that the information provided to the institute, not only had not been processed internally, but the presented paper work had also been lost!

.... Proof not a paper from a doctor [implying something trivial], but a thick file which I think if I go there this file, has vanished as they wanted me to do photocopy and I told them it would cost me loads to do it, so they did the photocopy themselves and presumably, it [the file] is still with them so far as I know... as then what happened was ... I had the exams and I checked the exams and I was in a class with others. So basically I gave you [the institute] the papers, I have proof but you are telling me that I do not have help? I come here ... LOADS of hassle, registrar tell me no, this and that [meaning no papers were found to

support his claim], then I bring the things again and they said all right...

Rob, ITS

Rob asserted that it would not take much to organise and communicate matters like his.

If one is dyslexic how [come] ... the lecturers don't know the student is dyslexic? ... They do a mark... they do an asterisk! All it takes is to waste some ink! Come on! You waste so much papers, by just doing an asterisk [to draw one's attention], "Listen this student is dyslexic, take care of him". You're not going to kill him [the staff who has to do this], this little ink is not going to cost you millions!

Rob, ITS

Rob questioned Lecturers knowledge on dyslexia and related learning conditions as he argued that it was evident that lecturers were ignorant of its impact on students' learning.

Some teachers do not even know what it is [dyslexia] let alone... I am dyslexic. When I see LOADS of words in front of me, I start staring and I start not to understand anything! I read once, twice... I struggle to read a lot of words even this [pointing to the information sheet I gave them in the beginning of the focus group], I get muddled up. I do not concentrate, for example ... A certain lecturer said to us "you have about 100 pages" hundred page? What? Full of text and one had to study them all. Also certain teachers do not know that I am dyslexic and they give me certain words which I don't even understand. I read ... like a parrot I am becoming...

Rob, ITS

Students - staff relations

Within ITS, 47% of students feel that lecturers understand their needs as students. However, at MCAST only 34% of students feel this way. For students, teachers are expected to act as positive role models and have a professional and caring disposition. Ramsden (1992) encourages the lecturer to try and understand from what perspectives students see the world. Lecturers are expected to try and amend teaching strategies by tapping into these perspectives and adapting them to communicate content and understanding to the students.

When I have a difficulty in particular assignments, some teachers make a tutorial to help us understand the topics ...

Male, MCAST

Certain lecturers have a lot of sympathy towards us. ... [name of a teacher] he understands. I heard him talk about us with other teachers "God bless them they just joined and are doing this type of work". He appreciates that fact, you understand? The Kitchen teachers are the ones who understand the students most. In fact one time he told us "I want you to pass. I am not here to catch you out".

Laura, ITS

... The lecturers, they ARE what is keeping this school alive. I think if it was not for the lecturers, there would be no students in this school...

Edmond, ITS

During the talk students were told that lecturers have an open door policy and that if you approached them they would understand you. Not all lecturers do that... maybe one-fourth of lecturers do it. Now this lecturer used to come and tell you, why are you not understanding? Have extra homework.... she used to show a lot of interest ... the student who talked about dyslexia, she knew he had

dyslexia and she used to give them more attention than others if he took longer to understand. She used to give him extra homework and tell him to do it, if you get stuck bring it and we correct it, she used to give something to those who are struggling, so that they understand, even at home sometimes she used to give us notes, she used to go out of her way... she has to give notes but she is not required to give you her personal notes which she purposely wrote up ... to help you understand more. There are a few, won't say all but one-fourth of lecturers do it.

Carlos, ITS

According to respondents most teachers were sympathetic to students' challenges whilst others were not. Students asserted that those who were sympathetic tried to help, but others, 'who are just in for the money', were inconsiderate and acted as negative role models as they did the minimum required and acted most inappropriately. Students believe that some teachers were giving a bad example by 'coming late into lessons', by 'talking about personal matters in class' and by using 'foul' and 'abusive' language towards them and also by occupying themselves within social media instead of carrying out their primary duty in the classroom. Students related instances, when a lecturer repeatedly engaged in flirtatious comments with students during class time. Students felt that such negative role modelling should be acted upon and where necessary, dismissal should also be enforced on teachers. Examples of excerpts related to the above allegations are provided below.

Let's say I want to become a teacher... if I see you don't even care and like, you are supposed to be my example to walk in your shoes ... I see that you complain about the school... you say that you don't care, that you can't wait until the day finishes... if I tell you stay 5 minutes extra after the lesson you tell me "no my day is finished" and you leave, which by the way actually happened. Last time we went 30 minutes late to a lesson because of transport and we said "can we stay 30 minutes extra?". He said "no, my day was long, I finished, I am going home". By the way this week he did

not come all week and we had a test and we needed the results....
Some people come here just for the wage, not to help us.

Mary, ITS

MCAST has many problems when it comes to academics.... Most of the teachers in my institute don't care about the students, because they are uninterested or are unwilling to help. I've had many teachers unwilling to help in assignments because they didn't want to "do the assignment for us" but even then, a simple question was just ignored or not answered properly.

Male, MCAST

Dismiss teachers who are not committed and spend their lessons on Facebook [name of teacher provided] and make sure teachers accept critique from students without dismissing it completely. Learning and teaching is a continuous process, teachers still have to learn, it is not exclusive to students.

Female, MCAST

Lecturers, some of them ... are distant... I see [name of teacher]. I often asked him for things, but he never took an interest. [Student explained that the teacher did not refuse to help but ... 'went home and forgot'] ... I asked him for notes, he did not hear me... I reminded him twice then I gave up.'

Jack, ITS Student

Lila: I don't really like using foul language and I hate hearing someone use foul language ... if teacher himself is speaking like that, how do you expect me to look up to him?.

Myself: can you give me an example?

Mary: yes ... 'bullshit'

Lila: if one tells you bullshit you give him two words in reply.

Mary: the same one who hits on [...] all the time... like flirting ,man! ... with her and with [...]

... Anyway, last time Louisa came late and she was talking, which I don't blame him but then he said "qed tqazilzi ... biex ma nkomplicx'...["you are disgusting my ..." I won't carry on...]"

Lila: COME ON! We know how to continue it miss [smiling]

Mary: We heard it all before but you don't say it to a student [laughing]

Lila: a teacher comes to speak to you like that how can you look up to him?

Mary: but then there was another teacher and by mistake [name of student] said 'What the F****' and the teacher said - AND THAT IS A GOOD EXAMPLE - she told her "if you can't speak without swearing don't speak at all." That is an example not you tell me that I am irritating your so and so...

A vignette from students' focus group at ITS

Although most of the comments about lecturers were positive, there were some students who also felt reform in methods of teaching and how lecturers deal with student problems was required. In fact, some students asserted that some lecturers were not only incompetent in their technical area, but were also weak in preparing and delivering the sessions.

The Sir with 'broken' English, he has *no* idea how to explain anything [murmur of general agreement in the background]. ... I

could have got up, open my notes from form 5 and start talking about [name of subject] ... it is true I am not good in presentations as I am shy, but where there is seriousness required, I try ...

I would like to know on what criteria they employ someone of such calibre?... He does not know his subject very well. I did [subject] for A level He contradicted me on [gave details]. I looked for it on the internet, I looked for it on a book I had. I also referred to the notes given by my previous teacher... all confirm my view. In the next lesson I told him ... he still contradicted all these sources... are you teaching well or are you confusing the students? Apart from that ... his English is terrible [general laughter]

Laura, ITS

The implication of the latter affirmation if found to be true, undoubtedly sheds negative light not only on the recruitment processes of the institutions, but also on the quality assurance and staff development processes found within. In support of these views, the external audit report of ITS states “The Institute has no systems and procedures in place to monitor the delivery of teaching and learning and can consequently not fully ensure that the standards required for individual programmes of study are being met” (NCFHE, 2016:10).

Ultimately, students would like to see teachers become more flexible and considerate about their current learning realities and their need, to balance education with gainful part-time employment (as can be seen in the next section). Participants of this study, complained of a ‘serious lack of understanding’ from the staff (inclusive of teachers) and through their words students clearly implied, that discriminating practices in their regards were being adopted by the institutions. More specifically some students claimed that they were penalised for late submissions of assignments, but as previously mentioned, students felt that the same rule of timely submission of marked assignments, did not apply to lecturers.

Students asked for their lecturers to be more sensitive and knowledgeable, in the daily fulfilment of their role. For the students, the vulnerabilities of all learners should be always

born in mind and not taken for granted. Students requested that above all, these vulnerabilities are not to be exposed without student's consent.

Lecturers shouldn't point out the good work of a student or the bad work of a student to the entire class, since this might make the student either hated (as they will be seen as a competition) or a laughing stock. Also when it comes to group work, lecturers should be more involved in the inner workings of each group, as many group work projects have gone far worse than expected, simply due to bad communication within the group and the lack of support from the lecturer.

Male, MCAST

In tackling the theme of teachers, students also mentioned the importance of increased communication and effective interaction with lecturers. Students call for monthly meetings with lecturers to discuss arising issues.

If lecturers would just explain what they want from us in terms of work, a lot of time can be saved and students who need more direct support in terms of showing their work can get the time they deserve.

Male, MCAST

ALL teachers should be aware of the rules, regulations and procedures and happenings ... We end up explaining to teachers and give out information ourselves (to them).

Female, MCAST

According to students, however, the reasons for not coping with their studies were not exclusive to curriculum issues, unmet or unsupported learning needs or unmet interpersonal relations issues with academic staff, but were also due to challenges in navigating the institutions, financial and psychosocial factors. The latter areas are explored in the next sections.

5.2 Challenges in navigating the educational institution

Students posited that general administrative services rendered (especially within ITS), included several delays and inefficiencies due to poor communication and organisation, inappropriate use of power and control, as well as abusive and unresponsive systems. These inefficient, abusive and inflexible systems, inevitably affected the perception of students and the local hospitality industry. The strongest critique of the institution were offered about these aspects of the institution.

Poor communication and organisation within General Administrative Services

As indicated in chapter 4 (and in previous sections of this chapter), students asserted that the quality of support and general administrative services was poorer than the service received from academics and definitely not in line with their expectations.

My biggest concern would be the other staff. As regards to previous years I strongly believe there is a big mess organisation-wise and it is affecting us students in a big way.

Female, ITS

Students experienced extreme poor communication within institutions in particular within ITS.

Teach us how you could be more polite by communicating better with verbal and non-verbal communication. At ITS students won't learn that!

Male, ITS

Students posited that for them poor communication was one of the most significant contributors to the disorganisation and subsequent inconvenience for both students and lecturers alike. Students argued that information was seldom given to them in the first instance. On the contrary, they said that they had to go and 'chase it'. An example of such a claim is presented below.

The teacher came three quarters of an hour late. We went to check with the registrar office to see whether our teacher was coming or not. One person from registrar asked “Which teacher?” [using an abrupt tone], I said: “one moment so I check her name”, and I went to check. The member of staff said “first thing, one of you only should be here, the others all need to be outside the classroom” [using a sarcastic tone]. I said “Miss we are only two here... the others are all outside the classroom”. I told her the teacher’s name but she said there was no one with that name. So I asked if the teacher was a part-timer?... The administrative representative was doing her own thing, and then instructed “YOU, stay here alone”, so I stayed there alone. Then I was going back and forth to the classroom area to see whether the teacher came or not... When the teacher arrived, I informed her and she replied “now you see why you all need to remain outside the class?” ... she was arguing with me whilst I was very polite with her... I was not asking anything grand, all I asked was to check if a teacher was coming... and when I told her that standing outside a classroom for three quarters of an hour was no joke and we were entitled to leave... she started getting angry and I left.

Ruth, ITS

At other times students were the ones to disseminate missing information

... We spent three weeks going to find the lecturer and tell him, “Sir, you know you have a lesson? And the sir would reply “eh how can it be I have a lesson now? ... I am with you now?”

Jane, ITS

Students asserted that they should be informed in a timely manner about any delays or cancellation of lectures so as for them to act accordingly.

By not wasting my time when the lecturer doesn't come. I live a good distance from the school... and coming for one lecture only to find out that the lecturer is sick is VERY frustrating.

Male, MCAST

Students argued that current information practices in this regard required some reconsideration and for one institution in particular, these practices also required technological updates. This issue was also identified in the external audit report (NCFHE [ITS], 2016). For example, students within ITS, argued that they wished to receive details regarding their attendance in the same way other educational institutions provided these details to their student populations.

Even if you miss a lesson, students elsewhere are informed via SMS [mobile text message] . ITS does not do this.

Male, ITS

Students felt that their experience of poor communication was due to fragmentation within the organisation. More specifically, students claimed that there was a huge barrier between administration, lecturers and students. This barrier placed the administrative staff on one side and the lecturers and students on the other. For the students it was as though administration felt superior to both academics and students.

There is a barrier between the administration, the lecturers and the students... I think they feel they are one team on one side, with lecturers and students another team on the other side.... Administration feel superior for some reason.

Ruth, ITS

Claude: There isn't dedication in their job.

Cindy: They make you feel like you're wrong as well.

Claude: One of the biggest issues is that THEY feel that *they're* a group and *we are* a [another] group ...

Cindy: [their] attitude as well ...

Claude: We are not part of them. I think that is the biggest issue. When it comes to lecturers and students they feel like we're peers.

Myself: Them who?

Claude: Mostly the registrar office

Cindy: Administration

Claude: The administration... they feel like we're apart - there is something in between... When it comes to the lecturers, there is no barrier. The student if he feels like there is an issue, he is going to tell the lecturer.

Cindy: ...and they are going to understand and try and help. Unlike the registrar office...

Claude: ... lecturers are very dedicated at ITS.

Cindy: ...but not the administration...

Claude: ...the administration, no, definitely not!

Cindy: ... The administration the first thing they tell you, it's kind of like "no you are wrong" or even if they go and check and find out that you're actually right, they still make you feel like it's your fault.

Claude: (Smiling) ...in fact, there is an internal joke ... we say that before we go into the registrar office, we start thinking about how they're going to tell us that we're wrong! So... eh hh [laughing] it's THAT bad!!! eh h [laughing]

An excerpt from students' focus group at ITS

Students argued that the poor communication augmented confusion and disorganisation. Students felt that the disorganisation found within departments, was synonymous with the quality of management in each department.

Melanie: Only one knows how to do everything, the others don't know ...

Myself: because they are new [employees]?

Melanie: not new, there are some they have been there for a long time. Once we went to ask for the index number and there were those who did not know it and this particular person was not there in the morning. I asked them to check as there was more than one person. Because [name] was not there, no body knew how to do it on the computer. NOBODY.

Myself: as they are new...

Ruth: So they don't teach them? They pay them for not knowing anything?

Jack: 'basta jghidu l-ilna fuq it training!' [so why do they tell us about training?!]

Melanie: I don't recall ever going once, ONCE and they gave me the right answer... Each time I went, either they don't know or they need to ask somebody.

An extract from students' focus groups at ITS

The above extract suggests that administrative offices would come to a halt if key personnel were away on sickness or leave. This implied training and knowledge management issues, as well as perceived poor departmental division of work. This perception has been validated extensively in the external quality assurance audit report.

Theoretically speaking, the Registrar's Office is responsible to collect, process, and manage information on student progression assisted by software, the so-called Student Information Tracking System (SITS). However, this Student Information Tracking System is not properly applied and used due to the lack of personnel capable of working with this programme. In the discussions the peers, understand that there is a need for additional resources and training modules for staff members to familiarise themselves with this programme to be able to manage information on student progression. Presently, the Registrar's Office uses physical files to manage the data on student's progression, but this system has proven inefficient as the information available from these physical files is incomplete and not available on time to use as a proper management tool.

NCFHE, external quality assurance audit report - ITS (2016:38)

and

[The] computerised Student Information Tracking system (SITS) is in place, but due to the lack of appropriate training, staff members are unable to use the system properly.

NCFHE, external quality assurance audit report - ITS (2016:12)

Students claimed that inefficiencies experienced, were not just due to poor managerial qualities, but also due to general administrative staff's negligence, lack of commitment and interest in one's work. For students this explained the constant loss of documents and the lack of information experienced between members of the institution.

They do nothing. ... what do registrar do? ... you go and speak to them and they tell you to go the next day.

Melanie, ITS

I went with the certificate. I spent five to ten minutes waiting for someone to get up. I said with a raised voice 'I have a certificate'. "LEAVE IT THERE" was the response with the wind blowing through! Now how do I know if after five minutes my certificate blew away? All the papers I gave them ... they lost... I had to give them to them once again... So how can I be certain that the doctor's certificate is still at them and not lost?

Tom, ITS

As indicated in above extracts, for students, some staff within ITS did not work wholeheartedly and clearly did not place students high on their agenda. Students argued that administrative staff demonstrated poor 'customer service' towards students and their enquiries made. According to Powell, Powell and Petrosko (2014), such rude self-centred behaviour is referred to as 'incivility'. Claims of incivility from administrative staff are listed below.

The employees in registrar could be more friendly and can greet us with a better attitude.

Female, ITS

There should be a guidance teacher inside registrar as they do not know how to talk to younger people and [they] do not know how much they are demotivating us with their words.

Female, ITS

Whenever I go to registrar there are six people, there are three on this side and three on this side [indicating left and right positions]. Two of them are on the PC, the other one is arranging the files, the other one talking on the mobile, and me I am there waiting like an idiot...

Jack, ITS

If someone goes to ask a query [in registrar], they remain seated in their place and procrastinate, and it shows that they do not want to be helpful. And most of the time the task involved is not so difficult to make.

Female, ITS

... Or else they stay on the phone. One time I stayed 15 mins waiting for them to finish on the phone. She does not open me the door I am looking at her and she is looking at me [through a glass section] whilst on the phone...

Laura, ITS

Laura: Ha nghidlek qeghdin daqxejn fuq qalbhom l-istudenti specjalment tarr- registrar ghax darba smajt konverzazzjoni ghaddejja bejniethom. (Let me tell you we are seen as a bit of an inconvenience, us students, especially with registrar staff as once I overheard a conversation between them.)... One said “not even a chance to have a break I have... so much [so, that] I had to close them the door, the students.” This was still our first week. You know since they get a lot of enquiries since they are SO organised [ironically said], but let us put that to one side and not go there.

One would have questions, no? And she [the employee in registrar] was saying she has no time for break ...

Melanie: always on break miss

Jill: all the time on the mobile...

Melanie: that is her duty in registrar (office), that is her work, that she helps people.

Laura: it was evident that she was not happy at all and her character ... showed that it has no respect whatsoever. There is no sympathy from their side, there isn't. Just they are here and they happen to be doing this job where there happens to be students ... when they can be working elsewhere...

An extract from a student focus group at ITS

Students claimed that they also felt that they could not take charge of their academic learning as they argued, that each time they tried, they had to reconsider, as their attempts were frequently met with unequal, paternalistic or patronising exchanges:

I went to ask registrar and told them "me, this and this subject, I already did them". They told me "you keep them, maybe they [content] change"! I told them "but if I am not seeing a change in the subject why should I be forced to do it?" I had to do it. After the third week... actually, the second week, I asked the sir. The sir of the [mentioned a subject] told me the same thing as the registrar office. I agree with him as maybe he was worried. Maybe he wanted me to pass and that. Anyway the lesson is informative all right. It is true that you have to stay in front of a power point and literally force your eyes open sometimes, but you learn something. The thing is I already covered this topic...

Jack, ITS

The above extract outlines an example of the patronising way students' views and attempts to exercise their agency were handled by administrative (and in some cases, also academic) staff. I feel it is equally important to consider the student's interpretation of the quality of guidance received (whether positive or negative), which as demonstrated in the above extract, depended to a great extent on the informant (be they clerical staff or academic staff) and more significantly, on the rapport students perceived with each of these staff. For example, the results from the focus groups suggested, that most respondents felt that they could *not* voice their opinion with the administrative staff, implying a poor rapport with them. By contrast, far fewer respondents felt that they could not voice their opinion with lecturers, implying better relations with lecturers. This is evident in the extract above, as the guidance received from both the clerical staff and the lecturer were identical, yet, the interpretation of the guidance received from the clerical staff, was seen as patronising and forceful in nature ('I had to do it'), whilst the guidance received from the lecturer was interpreted in a caring and positive manner ('I agree with him as maybe he was worried. Maybe he wanted me to pass and that').

Students in their affirmation that they had no autonomy whatsoever, also suggested that lecturers within the institution had 'lost' their autonomy too. Students claimed that they witnessed a teacher who thought s/he had one semester to cover a particular subject. In the last week of the semester just before the exams, the students said:

S/he had JUST found out that they have TWO semesters [not one] to cover the subject, so s/he ...has to make [up] some new syllabus for the second semester... They did not bother telling [her\him]... why bother...?

Melanie, ITS

On one hand, the above statement shows the student's frustrations. On the other hand, it implies the lack of autonomy of the lecturer, who is dictated to by someone else who controls the curriculum/syllabus.

Power and control over students

Students felt unconsidered. More alarmingly students argued that they were frequently exposed to verbal and emotional abuses. The following is an outburst of a student, who claimed that an administrative representative took the liberty to inflict another assignment on him, solely because the student had submitted the original assignment a day late. According to the student, not only was the administrative representative orally abusive, but this representative also took on an academic function which did not fall within her administrative role.

Reuben: Miss you tell me... [named an employee] what power does she have? To give me an assignment because I handed it in a day late? ... She came shouting and screaming with her moustache in her face ...

[general laughter]

Reuben continued:... [use of foul language]! Who she thinks she is shouting at me? Not even my father shouts with me!! If she shouts with me again I will slap her in her face [more serious foul language used]. I am not going to shy off, who she thinks she is coming to shout with me!

Geoffrey: Miss here you know what there is?

Reuben: Ghandha arja fuqha! [She is so full of it!]

Geoffrey: there are a couple of persons ...

Reuben: Ghandha arja fuqha! [She is so full of it!] Qazzu l'Alla!
[literal translation - They disgust God! Implying extreme behaviour.]

Geoffrey: ... they are NASTY, NASTY from the heart! They don't help you!.... They come to collect their wage, drink coffee and smoke a cigarette and that is it! They don't help you!

Although one cannot condone the ‘threats’ made by Reuben (‘if she shouts with me again I will slap her in her face’), and the sexist abusive language used, one cannot but ponder on Reuben’s main argument, that not only was the intervention of the administrative representative excessive, but also violated basic rules and regulations set by the same institution. In fact, in section 4.1 of the organisational students’ rules and regulations (ITS, 2014/5:17) stipulated that coursework dates should be set only by academics. Therefore the student concluded that in an administrative capacity, one was not entitled to take academic decisions. Furthermore, the Institute of Tourism Studies Act, (2012:11[section12i]) empowered the ‘Board of Studies’ as the governing body responsible ‘to deal about any other matter which refers to education and training and as may arise in the administration of the Institution.’ Therefore, it was implied that academic decisions and directions had to reach this board at all times.

Students in the group argued, that if they were not meeting deadlines in the first place, the addition of another deadline 'as a punishment' was 'nasty' and totally unsupportive to their complex educational and personal development journey. For students, ITS showed no sympathy towards them.

One student claimed that in addition to verbal and emotional abuse, she also experienced an instance of physical outburst which left students feeling shocked and shaken. Devito (2015) examines how acts of ‘throwing’ things (amongst other acts) constitute physical abuse. In fact, according to Devito (ibid) emotional and physical abuse, are two of the three types of violence (the third being sexual abuse), potentially experienced within interpersonal relationships. An example of such abuse is provided below.

Melanie: We went to pay and she threw the money at us!

Myself: what did she do?

Melanie: She threw us the money [the change]

Myself: when you say “threw”...

Melanie: like this [gesturing an abrupt forward action]

Laura: not respectful... not at all.

Melanie: ... my friend told her “Are you serious? Throwing her the money?” and she told her, “Mind your own business”! Like that, speaking to us like that you know...

Myself: You're serious?

Melanie: [small smile] One can't believe it

Laura: they gave us a receipt...

Melanie: even if there are mistakes on it, for nothing you argue with her.

Myself: but how does that make you feel as a student?

Melanie: Nothing. [They are] ignorant people - as if you can come to an agreement with people like that.

Laura: it makes me feel inferior.

Melanie: ... we cannot be blamed if sometimes we are arrogant ... [But] we did nothing, we [just] paid her.

Laura: ...out of the blue you know... we did her nothing!

An extract from a students' focus group at ITS

This extract outlines instinctive student solidarity (my friend told her “Are you serious throwing her the money?”), as well as outlines two contrasting responses to the demeaning behaviour they experienced. When asked ‘how does that make you feel as a student?’, one response indicated high resilience and self-worth (‘Nothing [they are] ignorant people. As

if you can come to an agreement with people like that!'), whilst the other indicated lower resilience ('it makes me feel inferior'). Additionally, the above extract, apart from relating an unpleasant and unacceptable behaviour from persons who are meant to 'model' student behaviour, also shed light on a number of other significant factors. For example, lack of SV was once again reaffirmed in this extract ('even if there are mistakes on it, for nothing you argue with her'); the universal norm of reciprocity (Keysar et al., 2008), was once again brought to the fore as students candidly admitted that sometimes their negative behaviour (which they imply is wrong [as they refer to it as 'arrogant']), was only their reaction to negative behaviours previously experienced within the institution.

Another example where students admitted to reacting negatively but 'with reason' is provided below.

Can I say something? Certain attitudes, I see it from myself...it changes because I would have four hours free [between classes], how can one not go crazy? Is it not obvious that I come for this lesson after I hang around four hours down there? I come here and put all upside down with the nervousness I would have?

Tom, ITS

Such an extended free period (with no wifi and recreational facilities), rendered the waiting time for students, a painful experience of nothingness. This in itself, created nervous tensions in students, which students admitted they released in subsequent classroom sessions.

Instances of verbal, emotional and physical abuse have also been reported as coming from lecturers and not just from administrative staff. Clear abuse of power, as well as the infliction of public humiliation (Cefai and Cooper, 2010, Devito, 2015) that some lecturers were subjecting students to, are delineated below.

Laura: Being my first year I never had service and as a waitress I never worked.

Melanie: Me neither

Laura: so I know absolutely nothing.

Phil: [Yet] they expect you to know everything [in the background]

Laura: now suddenly, I have to do silver service... I don't mind learning something new, not at all, but AT LEAST SHOW ME. But even when you do, SHOW ME, DON'T shout at me.

Melanie: in front of people ...

Laura: ...Imagine you try and understand as much as YOU CAN so that you do not make a fool out of yourself in front of people because people are there sitting ... actual customers... and you are trying to put things as they should be and he PULLS you from the shirt. He literally pulls you from the shirt. [Complete silence]. For me that is totally unacceptable ...or otherwise shouting at me in front of people.

Myself: Can you give me an example of what you understand by “shouting” so that I can understand?

Laura: ...he raises his voice... The type so that he is heard... that he is shouting at me in front of people.

Myself: ...so he says, ‘no, not like that?’ [Raised voice]

Laura: the exact words he used at the moment I forgot them but it is not something pleasant that he says ...

Melanie: ...he embarrasses you...

Laura: True, he embarrasses you.

Myself: How do you suggest he approaches you during the service then?

Laura: [immediate reply]... as the other teacher did when he was not there. ... this teacher approaches slowly, lets you finish with the customer and then tells you... listen you put them incorrectly can you go and arrange them. Like that. No need for shouting, chaos, panic....

An extract from a students' focus group at ITS

Students claimed that the frequent aggravations received instilled in them an immediate sense of fear and humiliation.

Claude: another thing is they are not very approachable... especially last year they were not approachable at all!

Cindy: They shout at you as well!

Claude: you'd come in and you'd be scared to talk to them

Cindy: she gives you a look Like, "Why are you coming to bother me? What do you want?"

An excerpt from a students' focus group at ITS

Students affirmed that in cases where the institution was at fault, the 'negative' consequence was again turned directly or indirectly onto the student. Alfred's and Tom's situations presented below, support this claim.

In his narration, Alfred asserted that in a module that ran over two semesters, he was allocated two separate teachers. All students present in the focus group, felt that there should only have been one teacher allocated for the same module. Alfred argued that both

teachers were expected to give a separate coursework mark. It appeared that the teacher in the second semester, had to close the module by also taking into consideration the mark allocated by the first teacher of the first semester. According to Alfred, the second teacher did not include the marks of the first teacher. Consequently, the student failed and was informed by the registrar's office, that he could not continue the course.

The registrar office met the teachers... they themselves wanted me to take it up ... not the registrar office you know, as the registrar office continued to harm me till the end! They wanted me themselves to take up the issue further... and things sorted themselves out. Not sorted themselves out that I passed the year, but that they gave me the opportunity to repeat it. I had no reason to repeat it ... but at least they gave me a chance.

Alfred, ITS

Alfred was disappointed with what happened but surprisingly, unlike the majority of students who shared their negative experiences in this study, did not speak with anger, resentment or vengeance. Instead, Alfred seemed appreciative of the fact that at least a partial resolution was found.

Tom's outburst below on the other hand, reflects a very different experience and impact on the student. Tom's choice of words, accompanied by his nonverbal gestures and combined with his evident involuntary physical reactions (his head and neck went bright red as he spoke, whilst simultaneously raising his tone in an agitated manner), rendered his intervention reflective of the exasperated experience he was so candidly trying to share.

Persons like those who tried to harm me... now whether they did it intentionally or not, for me harm they made me! I can speak to these people face to face [hitting his clenched fist as he spoke], as I am not embarrassed! I can appear on TV with these people as not JUST BECAUSE THEY ARE BIG, and have power [still hitting his clenched fist] and money, as much as they may have. For ME THESE PEOPLE [hitting even

harder his clenched fist], they do me nothing in my life!! Since I see no respect I am not going to give them respect back miss! And as I am telling you... as I am telling you, me these people they can be in any party [political] as I don't care about these things!

Tom, ITS

Tom explained that the previous summer (almost a year before this focus group), he was called by the institute to see whether or not he wanted to proceed with the new academic year and the student confirmed that he wanted to, but indicated that he had a pending module. Tom was told 'not to worry', as they would get back to him on that. The student progressed and meanwhile he subsequently learnt, that the pending module was running concurrently to the new academic year. However, at the commencement of the term, he was not made aware of this as he 'received no paper at home, nor they sent for [him], nothing.' After a few weeks into the beginning of the academic year, Tom found out that his friends received a notice for graduation but he got nothing. When he enquired at registrar, they told him that they would get back to him, which 'this time they did', claiming that he had not received notice for graduation, since he still had a pending module! Tom confirmed that he knew about the module, but he also confirmed that he had brought the matter to the registrar's office earlier in the year and was told to wait for them to get back to him.

Tom explained to me that his case went up to the board of studies for deliberation. The Board of Studies, simply drew his attention to the result paper slip, where it stated that if there was a pending module, it was the student's responsibility' to inform the registrar's office. Tom explained that he was not in agreement with the board, as the board did not take into consideration the fact that he *had* followed up on his pending module. As Tom wanted to find a solution to resolve matters speedily, he chose not to push the matter further and they told him that they would 'try' and see what they could do.

Now I, by word of mouth they had called me and told me that it was not a problem and that I was to leave it in their hands and then when it mattered most, they retracted that and said it [the error] was from

my side because “as much as they put in, I had to put in [effort] too”!?!

Although Tom’s experience may be seen as an organisational and communicative flaw, Tom’s experience also reveals his disillusionment and subsequent loss of credibility in the institution. Tom asserted that he originally trusted the representative who had reassured him orally, that he would be contacted. Tom also put faith in the system, hoping that the Board of Studies would provide a fair resolution. However, according to Tom, this was not the case and Tom felt let down.

Another shared experience involved a student who claimed that an assignment was due. The student explained that the assignment was not submitted due to sickness. When the student returned back to school, the assignment was not accepted by the lecturer and when the student approached the registrar’s office, ‘whilst being shouted at’, the student was told ‘that the deadlines had to be met!’ The issue was eventually channeled up to a higher level and the student was reassured it would be resolved. However, till the day of the focus group, the student had no idea what happened to the assignment, and whether any marks had been allocated.

Students processed lack of responses as ‘indifference’. For students, a ‘lack of response’ was experienced significantly worse than a ‘negative response’. Students claimed that a negative response would eventually be accepted and subsequently forgotten in time, but the ‘lack of response’ with its implied indifference was more emotionally aggravating (Devito, 2015).

Miss, I am telling you IN HERE: the student, they treat him like
RUBBISH!

Paula, ITS

Such levels of exasperations were frequently noted within this study. More specifically, administrative staff perceived by students as abusive and inefficient, were also perceived as insensitive. Paula shared a personal experience which according to her and the rest of participants of the focus group, would in ‘normal circumstances’ solicit compassion and

support. The group unanimously asserted that not only had she got no compassion and support from the registrar's office, but she was unexpectedly given a hard time!

... I spoke to [name]. I am not at all ashamed to tell her ... [she] is not a woman but is a "bhima!" [Beast!]. Literally she is a "bhima! [A beast!]"...

... Why is she creating all this hassle for me? Din qed tghidli ieqaf l'ITS ghalxiex qed taghmel hawn? [It is as though she is telling me "Stop [coming to] ITS. What are you doing here?"] ... This is what the school is telling me... don't come...

Paula, ITS

Paula, equally visibly agitated like Tom, explained how in her opinion, 'this beast' made it excessively hard for her to deal with an existing sensitive personal issue, by requesting numerous specific documents. What made matters worse for Paula, her family and friends present, was the realisation that on 'finally' producing all these documents (the acquirement of which involved significant financial expense) and in trying to provide detailed information of each, the representative in question said to Paula: 'u ijja all right, fhimtek! [Ok, all right, I got your point!].

Paula asserted that this member of staff insisted 'by force', on taking the issue up to the board of studies. When I tried to clarify that all students' issues ARE to be taken up to the board (as clerical staff could not possibly take academic decisions), I was immediately stopped by the participants present, who claimed that I was not understanding what they were getting at. I was told:

... The issue we are making is not that they [clerical staff], took the matter to the board [board of studies], but that the member of staff [clerical], simply took the decision [she had] already made known to the student, UP to the board, so as for the board to merely rubber-stamp the decision already made by clerical staff in the first place!

Paula, ITS

The above extract not only sheds light on the insensitivity and lack of tact shown towards Paula at a time when Paula was facing a sensitive personal issue, but also portrayed the internal ways of ‘playing’ with rules. More concerning was the fact that Paula and her friends (like Tom in the previous example), had experienced the same disillusionment and loss of credibility — this time not only of the representatives of the registrar office, but also of the board of studies, which in students’ opinion was tokenistic in nature.

Students noted however that bureaucratic systems encountered, primarily revolved around administrative needs more than students’ (or lecturers’) needs.

[For the module exemption], we had to go find the teacher, the head of department, then they sign and then the registrar office representative said “The teacher has to come to us with the form you give them”. ...this is a waste of time for the teacher ...and then we went and the teacher said to me “Do me a favour, can you go and give it to the registrar office? Mhux xorta? [Is it not the same? (referring to the conversation with the registrar office) ...that I am giving it [handing in the paper instead of the teacher]? ... “No, no tell your teacher [S\HE] has to come! IF [S\HE] has no time, WE have no time either, if she is busy WE are busy too! You tell [HER] HIM] to come.” ... Mind you, that is a quote. THAT IS a quote! [smiling first then laughing]... so I went back to the teacher and said, “Sorry, the registrar office said ...YOU have to go with it [the exemption application form]”.

Mary, ITS

The study showed that students were most especially dissatisfied with the inflexible interpersonal approaches experienced with administrative support staff. Many students felt mistreated, unprotected and unrepresented. They argued that as a consequence, there was a loss of credibility in the institutions.

Alex: The timetables were out as they should be and ... after a week ... she calls you and says just come and pick up your

timetable [as the timetable changed]. So to my mind, I had to come here and pick up the time table and go home... I came, I did not come in uniform to pick up a timetable. I came with a track suit 'pulis' [neat], casual ... she said to me, "I don't want to give you the timetable." Like that eh, with all the arrogance. I said to her "why don't you want to give me the time table? You told me just come and pick up the time table?"

In the background: as on Mondays we did not have a lesson before this change ...

Alex (continued): She told me as "you have a lesson at four and I am not going to give it to you the time table". I said what do you mean you do not give me the time table? You told me to come at noon just to pick up your timetable AND I have a lesson at four?!!. She told me get the uniform see what you are going to do" she said "THEN I give you the time table." and she went inside and she left me there 'lampa u stampa' there [expression meaning left bluntly standing there] I mean and she just went in.... now I do not live close. I live in [...]

Myself: and she did not give you the timetable?

In the back ground: and the lesson did not take place... you have to consider the time he spent coming here [and going back]

Alex: No she did not give it to me. I came up, I lost three hours from my life, I could have gone to work...

An extract from students' focus group at ITS

Another instance of student dissatisfaction with members of the registrar's office, was offered by two 'highly distraught' students who unexpectedly walked into an ongoing research focus group and interrupted the session. These students had already attended a focus group of their own, but they felt they wanted to 'urgently' share with me, their latest

experience of conflict with administrative members of the institution. Amongst the details provided, the students claimed that they were both ‘summoned urgently’ (with no explanations whatsoever) to the registrar office. Students claimed that they were instructed to ‘drop’ everything and comply with the received instruction, to urgently contact in person the registrar office. On arrival at the registrar office, the following dialogue was claimed to have ensued:

Paola: Tell me what you did today

Andrew: What do you mean, what did I do today? I had lessons ...

Paola: Tell me exactly what you did today...

Andrew: I said “I came had a lesson of [...], then we had a break and we stayed studying, then we had a lesson of [...], then we went to eat from McDonalds and then I was going to the lesson ... [but] you asked me to come here...”

Paola: Is that all?

Andrew: Yes, that is all.

Paola: That is all?

Andrew: Yes that is all so far as I know.

Timothy: ... Miss, she was laughing at me! She was laughing at me as I said to her that I was in an interview at [Named a 5 star hotel in the area]. She is LAUGHING AT ME IN MY FACE! Who does she think she is? [Very raised voice]?!!!

Myself: Calm down... [His verbal and body language reflected his anger and agitation]

Timothy: She spoke to me with arrogance on the telephone you know!

Andrew: And I... I am repeating a subject and I lost the lesson ... we were going to do revision and I missed it.

Timothy: “COME NOW, COME NOW!” she said. “COME NOW as we need to speak to you!”

Andrew and Timothy, ITS

In hearing the students narrative, it transpired that the urgency was related to a photo they had just uploaded on Facebook. The students challenged me to find something wrong with the photo. Not immediately identifying what could be so wrong in the photo to generate such alleged extreme organisational reaction, I remained hesitant. Students confirmed that the issue revolved with the “level of grooming”, which in the eyes of the institute was *not totally* in line with regulations. The students, faced with what for them was an unconceivable circumstance, felt exasperated as they claimed that they did nothing wrong as they only captured a moment of bonding (which they wanted to share publicly in their personal Facebook account) with members of their class group. In fact, the writing under the photo related the importance they attributed to friendships made within their educational journey and it was outrageous for them to realise, that they could not even upload what they saw as ‘a harmless photo’ on their personal Facebook account. In their opinion, the institute had ‘crossed the line and was now intruding in [their] personal life’.

In line with the theme of inappropriate use of power and control, I would like to share a compelling self-reflection by Jean, an ITS student. Jean, like other students, was invited to attend students’ focus groups. However, Jean could not make the sessions and on my offer to meet at any time convenient to him, he saw no reason to meet on a one-to-one basis or with any other focus group for that matter. He clearly implied that he had formed an opinion, which he just wanted to put forward in this study ‘nothing more’. Admiring his assertive physical and verbal composure, I accepted with appreciation his participation in whatever form he wanted to provide it. A few days later, Jean approached me and he gave

me a typewritten note, which in view of its unwavering message has been included ‘verbatim’ below:

‘The exploitation of students within industries remains a common fact amongst students who are exploited into either minimal or no wages at all (in some cases), as a required full-time “placement” employment, which failing to complete may result in the termination of the students from their schools. However, after which intern-ship, employers keep students as supposed ‘part-time’ employees. What is not being looked into is the growing concern that students are being made to work full-time (over forty hours) a week when they have to attend a full-time course with ITS at the same time.

While this breaches the terms of the students’ contract, this in nonetheless a psychological burden for several reasons. Most students lack the strength and skill to deal with the issue effectively, having an inherent traditional social fear of their ‘Chef’ and thus saying ‘no’ when made to work more hours than they should.

This leads to several problems, needless to say. Problems, many of which, are suffered by most students within ITS today: Insomnia, sleep deprivation, fatigue, psychological disturbance, alcohol and drug abuse, anxiety, mood swings, unprofessionalism (tardiness, absenteeism, etc.) And one can’t help but speak on behalf of several students when mentioning that it’s simply a shame that those very students subject to such disturbance should be put through the extra mental pressure of having the acute fear of failing their course for lack of sufficient attendance (which most of them will end up doing, sadly).

Full-time hours aside, it is a valid argument to make: How can a student be made to work an eight hour shift right after school having to wake up the next day to go to school again? This leaves minimal time for grooming, homework, studying, and as most students do not have a driver's license, it is simply unreasonable to demand of a student that he/she should work school nights. It is an inhumane practice and yet the most common accordance within the hospitality industry that continually goes on and with 'trusted' hotels that are in good communication with the ITS placement office.

Whilst is an issue that we, as student, believe should be worked. A solution of which would be increasing the monitoring of students' rosters instead of simply leaving students to deal with their workplace issues alone. Also, that students failing attendance due to work related matters, should be exempted upon accurate representation of their work-place exploitation (by handing in all their rosters whereby they were made to work on school nights, previously).'

Jean, ITS

In contrast to Tom's and Paula's visceral outbursts, Jean's intervention presented a more rational (no capital letters, exclamation marks were included in the document) and eloquent manifesto. Jean's decision to hand in a written piece also underscored his depth of feeling and perhaps desire to 'get it right', which may have been harder to do in a group, as oral contributions cannot be revised and checked as easily. He eloquently set out the difficulties faced by those students who were resilient enough to 'make it through' the internship experience, who subsequently found themselves coerced into juggling a full-time work requirement schedule, in tandem with a full-time programme of studies.

In this solidarity statement ('And one can't help but speak on behalf of several students...'), Jean put forward his unequivocal views that students were not only coerced and exploited by industry ('are being made', 'when made to work'...), but they were equally being

neglected by the Institution and in full awareness of what was taking place in industry, students were being left to fend for themselves ('It is an inhumane practice and yet the most common accordance within the hospitality industry that continually goes on and with "trusted" hotels that are in good communication with the ITS'). He hinted that between businesses and academic institutions, there was an unspoken collusion, by which students were squeezed beyond normal expectations. Jean pointed out, that with these increasing pressures, the students not only felt the lack of institutional 'protection' and representation that should follow them in their educational journey, but also felt that the coping mechanisms of students were eroded with negative consequences for their physiological, emotional, personal and academic spheres. By implication it follows, that students with low resilience stand no chance of survival and once disillusioned by both institution and industry, such students opt to drop-out.

Unequal treatment of students

Students argued that not all students were treated equally. More specifically students claimed that some were treated (or supported), better than others.

All students [should be] helped within employment, not just the top students.

Male, MCAST

Teachers should not pick favourite students, and help them individually and [whilst] ignor[ing] the others.

Male, MCAST

I am aware of a FULL TIME student who also has A FULL TIME JOB ... She barely turns up for lectures. Lecturers try to hide this. So while the rest are attending lectures and not working PART TIME to cope with the huge work load, this student is not attending lectures to work full time... not to mention the advantage of the wages [she earns]!

Female, MCAST

By adding [increasing] the smart card [financial grant allocated to students] value especially in HND and Degree level. Students at University get over a thousand while we get 600 which sometimes is not enough.

Male, MCAST

In line with the latter student's claim, an ITS student (extract below) challenged ITS to obtain the smart card for its students too, since they were the only post-secondary students who did not get it!

When [will] ITS have [the] balls to ask the government for a Smart card or a higher stipend instead of a smart card'...

Male, ITS

Students mentioned other examples where students of other institutions or on other campuses benefitted in ways that they could not. For example (and as seen in chapter 4), students noted inequality between the amount of students activities held in one campus, compared to those held in satellite campuses. Additionally, the issue the warrant (or lack of it for some students), has also been explored.

The above sections portray students perceptions about academic and organisational challenges and how these related positively or negatively on their development and academic journey. Students claimed that it was not just them to speak negatively about the institution, but also members of the hospitality industry. The next section exposes students' claims in this regard.

Students' perspectives on the impact of their institution on the local hospitality industry

As already indicated in the first part of this chapter, students argued that they learnt more from industry than from ITS. Students, however, admitted that this learning was sometimes also accompanied by embarrassing and denigrating interactions with members

of the hospitality industry, who bluntly conveyed to students their dismay at their lack of basic technical skills.

I face a lot of challenges at work since I'm studying to become a chef... [At work], they ask me to do something and I wouldn't know how. The response is "you're a first year diploma, how can you not know this? What are you going to do when you're abroad?" and the feeling you get is like you're worthless.

Ramona, ITS

Fiona: We go to work, they tell you, "do a [...]". I don't know how to do a [...] "What do you go to do at ITS???" [industry representative tells the student]...and they shout at you! They assume that you know ... on something like that you can lose your job ... It is not easy to go to work and you know that they will make you conscious that you are capable of doing nothing, because you did not learn well at school...They expect [that from you] at the end of the day, as they are paying us [so if the industry sees they are not good they may terminate their part time work].

Tom: When I tell my chef what we do, miss, he laughs at me. He LAUGHS at me! When I tell him that ... for lunch service we would be 15 students [in the kitchen] with 15 people [customers]

Others continued ... or 4, or 6 [customers!]

Tom: WHAT are we learning? ... at least teach us the technique first through individual kitchen sessions [where students practice a task on an individual level]. Show me how to peel an onion properly, show me how I chop parsley properly, because there are those... who do not know how to chop parsley as he squashes parsley not chops it...!

Timothy: 'He would not know if the knife is held incorrectly!'

Tom: Precisely.

An extract from students' focus group at ITS

In these extracts, the frustration of students comes across, along with their sense of shame at not being able to display their professional skills to potential employers during work placements. Students felt that not only were they laughed at for not having mastered basic skills, but the whole experience, also reflected poorly on the institution and employers' expectations of it and its students.

In further examples, students spoke of poor processes within their institution that also reinforced this image of their institution being 'unprofessional':

Mary: 2 weeks ago Pierre went for an interview at [name of hotel]. ITS told him that 'your gonna receive a call soon'. Last week they [from hotel] called him that he did not get the job because of the non professionalism of [ITS]. He lost the job at [name of hotel] because of ITS.

Jim: cause apparently you can't call for feedback.... Pierre called to get feedback.

Mary: yes but ITS called first. No wait. ITS called [Hotel] and [hotel] called Tom because he didn't get the job. After like 2 days Pierre called back to ask them why didn't he get the job and they told him "you did not get accepted because ITS [a particular representative] showed us how unprofessional ITS is."

An extract from students' focus group at ITS

In this instance it was very difficult to understand the sequence of events as students were speaking over each other, rushing to express what happened. In general terms, the group of students relating this situation were *adamant* that their friend Pierre, did not get the job because of something ITS did, which in turn did not 'go down' very well with management representatives of this particular hotel. Students spoke with a sense of disapproval towards the institute and its representatives and categorically implied, that the institute was meant to help students find jobs not help them lose them! The group gave me other similar

examples where they felt their employment prospects were being scuppered by the unprofessional practices of their institution, and that as a result, they had to fend for themselves in finding jobs:

... **Louisa:** Mr [surname] of [name of hotel] the director of [named a department] told me “send this message, tell them that they are very disorganised and they can’t expect us to train a student in peak season”, that is what he said and that he is not going to accept students in [department].

Lila: In this case I think, media affects whatever he is saying [perception] ... exactly cause media wasn’t saying nice things about ITS lately.

Louisa: [an ITS employee] told me she called [name of hotel] to check if there were any vacant positions within the [...] department or any department and the HR stated that there were no vacancies. But there WERE.

Myself: ITS got the message wrong? ... or industry actually told ITS they had no vacancies?

Louisa: the latter.

Jim: because of the reputation ITS has.

Mary: Louisa and I got the job ourselves.

An extract from students’ focus group at ITS

The school sen[t] the CV and from three CVs [sent], nobody replied. When I went to tell them I had not heard anything, they said “that is your fault, it is a sign you are not good if they did not send for you... now it is your problem if you do not find a job in summer you will not pass”. Then, I sent the CV myself [to the same institutions]... and

they employed me! ... The hotel replied the next day, asking me over for an interview and on the day [of the interview], I got the job. So what did the school do?

Melanie, ITS

Upon further investigation, I found that within the last two years, the institute had been sending students' CV's in a standardised format (inclusive of an ITS' logo), so that ITS CV's could be immediately identified and filtered from those coming from the general public and presumably, immediately shortlisted for interviews. However, the above excerpts suggest that the ITS standardised CV's were possibly having the opposite effect on industry representatives. This was something very serious to apprehend for me as a lecturer working within the institution. Yet on reading the NCFHE's ITS external quality assurance report, I came across an extract which decisively (especially concluding sentence), sheds light and validity to students alleged perceptions and experiences.

The overall message presented by the many stakeholders has been that in recent years there has been a considerable downgrading of internal and external communication patterns in combination with an absence of leadership... The problem goes beyond mere instruments such as an active and up-to-date webpage e.g. (according to the evidence on the table, the ITS website was updated the last time over a year ago) many stakeholders, including teaching staff, administrative support staff, students on all levels of education as well as industry representatives pointed out, that not least due to frequent changes in leadership/or the absence of key personnel no reliable and credible contact and communication channels [within ITS] were available.

NCFHE External Quality Assurance Audit Report, ITS (2016:20)

Not surprisingly, students sometimes refused to show their connection with ITS to members of the industry for fear that their search for employment may fail for this reason.

I think I found a job at [name of organisation]. Is it possible that ITS DOES NOT interfere [one clap gesture] and I choose my place of work?

Tom, ITS

Although extreme, this suggests that students had lost faith in the institution in terms of its duty towards them. In turn, they did not seem to relate in any positive way to the institution and with this lack of sense of belonging, it was implied that students were disaffected with the institution (Skinner and Pilfer, 2012).

When I asked what kept students from leaving, the students explained that it was the certification keeping them and the lack of alternatives in the provision of local hospitality education. Students suggested that in the absence of qualitative enhancements, competition in the hospitality education would close down the institute permanently.

To be fair we were 25 at first and are now 18, so 7 of us [28% of the original group], are already gone and MORE are resigning ... When you have the ITS name on your CV you get a better job, its like seen more...

Mary, ITS

When I highlighted that this last sentence posed a contradiction with what they previously asserted about the bad reputation ITS had accumulated, Mary replied

We do have bad reputation, but we do not have any more hotel schools in Malta... You need this qualification to get a job in a hotel.

The above excerpts posit that students, not only felt dissatisfied by the practices found within ITS, but were also embarrassed with the perceptions and associations with ITS outside the institute.

Respondents claimed, that when they explained to other youths that they studied at ITS, the reply was: “how many things I hear about that school [followed by laughter of the

speakers]!’ It is suggested that these responses were also due to the various public media reports (social media, newspapers, as well as through numerous parliamentary questions) which took place during the last five years and which have put into disrepute, the institution and the members representing it. Consequently, regardless of whether the published content was slanderous or not, it unquestionably tarnished the integrity and stability of the institution and impacted negatively both on an external (public reputation) and on an internal level (the ethos of the organisation).

From the words, tones, agitation, and body language used in portraying this emotion, it appeared that at this point in time, this feeling of embarrassment and shame that students expressed was not superficial. Poulson (2000), explains the progressive feelings of guilt, embarrassment and shame very informatively in his paper entitled ‘Shame and Work’ and he argues that members of an organisation (inclusive of educational establishments and its members), feel these emotions as a result of different triggers which over a period of time, unless resolved satisfactorily, accumulate within an individual or groups of individuals (into what he called ‘shame tanks’) and in citing Bly (1991), asserts that ‘as life proceeds shame is added to the tank with perhaps minimal impact until the tank is filled to capacity then it explodes’ (Poulson, 2000:9). As a result, individuals may act out of character in the process of restoring equity within self (Sears et al., 1985).

5.3 Financial Challenges faced by Students

Quite a few students spoke positively about the national stipend system, which allowed both ITS and MCAST to forward monies to students on a monthly basis (please refer to appendix 2d). One or two students also mentioned that they benefitted from the supplementary stipend funding (this funding is forwarded to students who come from disadvantaged socio economic background).

MCAST supports me in the supplementary stipends [government funding], because my father died 6 years ago at the age of 70 years, with cancer. And the fact that I earn a little extra money makes a little difference.

Male, MCAST

From my informal conversations with students, there was a clear indication that students were not aware of the existence of the supplementary stipend system. Others felt embarrassment to approach persons to discuss this issue as they wanted to keep their personal financial problems outside the learning environment. On enquiring within ITS as to why this information was not made readily available to students, I was told that this was a national initiative and students could easily access this information via the internet. This response confirmed to me the emotional distance that exists between students and administrative staff, who are supposed to facilitate a 360° student support network (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012).

Although feedback about the stipend system was positive, this study shows that following a MHVE course exacerbated students' existing financial hardships. Some claims were more powerful than others and these will be explored in more detail in the next section.

My laptop is not working well and I have to repair it... I have to work on the school's computer in the library. Due to financial problems I cannot afford to repair the laptop... in fact, I have to wait to receive the next stipend.

Female, MCAST

I live only with my mother and my stipend alone doesn't cover up my needs. I use my stipend wisely not on rubbish. But I need 25 euros a month for the bus as I don't drive yet. I need to buy knives, utensils for my practicals... always enhancing what I have in my [knife] pouch and also sometimes I need money to do photocopies since a lot of the lecturers provide us with power-points not handouts.

Grant, ITS

In the following statement the student implied that the situation at home was bad enough to warrant alternative lodging.

Family issues are normally deemed personal matters. However, for myself and a few other students, life at home is far from satisfactory to work on school projects or degrees. Perhaps one solution would be the offering of lodging or a student space so students like myself and others that may get the time they need to accomplish their work without family getting in the way.

Female, MCAST

As implied in the above extract, social issues clearly have a negative impact on the students wellness and as a consequence (especially if student resilience is low), puts the student under high risk of academic failure (Borg and Calleja, 2006). This is because, in line with Armstrong's (2006) position, the priority of this student would be to address the social and personal needs, more than proceed with the academic pursuit. The excerpt below, contrasts significantly to the above excerpts, as the latter student claimed that her family supported her.

As an MCAST Art & Design student studying 3D Design, MCAST has drained me financially as the stipend does not cover any cost of material and appliances needed, the school also does not offer good computers and as part of our work is based on computer generated work this means that every individual needs a good laptop that is strong enough to use programs which are very heavy, the minimum spent to buy a good laptop is that of 1850 [euro], a laptop would only cover school needs as one also needs a powerful computer to render at home which would also cost around 2000 euros... these costs do not cover money spent on materials, this month alone the creation of a fashion garment cost me 120 euro excluding the photoshoot, makeup artist and hair dressing service in order to produce a good outcome. If it wasn't for the financial support of my parents, the course would have never allowed me to continue my studies into the level of a degree. As a degree student... the stipend should be raised. One might say the smart card [financial

grant allocated to students] is enough, but that covers no cost at all! Building products to a full scale [as part of an assessment prerequisite found within her programmes of studies], requires ample amounts of money!

Female, MCAST

The latter student refers to items costing thousands of euros, thus implying that her family's socioeconomic status was quite elevated. In the same vein, Grant (three excerpts above) was focusing on basics; such as transport, knives, and handouts... His choice of words, 'I use my stipend wisely not on rubbish', appear to demonstrate his ability to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials. Therefore, it follows that Grant's financial context was clearly more challenging than that of the MCAST female student above. According to Cefai, Cooper and Camilleri (2009:27), students from lower socioeconomic status are most at risk at developing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, which again contribute to the vulnerability of the student where academic success is concerned. Perceived student emotional wellness is explored in the next section.

In view of the above diverse realities, the element of work and more particularly, the need to work to support oneself financially, so as to increase one's income (in conjunction with the stipend system) and consequently, be in a position to meet increasing academic requirements as well as personal requirements, has emerged extensively from both institutions of this study. For example, Therese puts forward the following argument.

ITS [provides] a free service which you do not pay for. I am thankful for that because otherwise I could not afford it. However... most students suffer financially and [they] have to work part time after lectures to stay afloat.

Therese, ITS

Therese demonstrated appreciation for free schooling and implied recognition of support rendered by the government, whilst at the same time recognising others' need to work irrespective of the financial support received. The perception that this is a 'most cases' scenario, rather than unique scenario for Therese, sheds important light on the student

experience. This was re-affirmed by another student who remarked that the government and HVE institutions were providing financially to the students, but it was not enough.

I think ITS and the government is giving us enough financial support in [with] regards to stipend, but we still have to work because otherwise it is not enough.

Female, ITS

Expenses were discussed with students in all focus groups, since this study was *inundated* with claims that students did not cope financially.

Students at ITS have to buy several uniforms, knives, and equipment, which in the first year of my studies cost me around 500 euros!

Female, ITS

Melanie: With the stipend how can you cope? You HAVE to go out and work!

Jill: They tell us ‘you cannot work [part time]’

Melanie: They tell us ‘first priority should be given to school then to work’.

Jill: They don’t want you to work but at the same time they are making you work.... There are those students that live alone, how are you going to pay for things?

An extract from a students’ focus group at ITS

Let us take printing... it is frightening! 10c a page, 10c a page ... In my stationary [where student resides] 9c for three [not] 10c per page! Once I needed to print 24 pages, she told me 2.40 euros!

Laura, ITS

Some feedback from MCAST was also drawn from the online questionnaires.

We get an 80 euro stipend per month but who can live with 80 euros per month with these expenses? They need to consider the student's backgrounds a bit more. The cost of the average lifestyle is way beyond that!

Female, MCAST

We have to pay for our own projects even the printing needs to be paid for. How can a school that teaches graphic design makes you pay for printing your work? Also the services in this area are very limited. I once had to pay over 250 euro just for 1 assignment. We get an 80 euro stipend per month but who can live with 80 euros per month with these expenses?

Female, MCAST

Do something about the prices of the canteen and stationery, keeping in mind that we are still students, the prices are quite high. 80 cents for a bottle of water is quite expensive, for students that have 80 Euro monthly. Sorry if this point may not count, but I thought it is worth mentioning.

Male, MCAST

Together with one of the groups we worked some rough calculations (found in table 7), based on basic physiological (food and drink), safety and security (transportation and communication) needs only (Armstrong, 2006). The figures showed a monthly expenditure of 71 Euro, with a net stipend of approximately 80 Euro. All the academic financial requirements for the purchase of uniforms, books, photocopies and other assignment based printing requirements, tools, as well as personal and familial requirements were not listed.

Table 7: Student's Budget Requirements

	weekly	monthly
Bottle of water a day whilst on campus	50c x 5 days= 2.50	10 euro
A hobza (local bread) per day	1.5 x 5=7.50	30 euro
Maximum transport cost (national system student rate)		21 euro
Mobile card (basic cover limited internet data)		10 euro
		71 euro

Also not included in the 'student's budget requirements' table, were the expenses related to the international travel of students. For some programmes (diploma or national higher diploma programmes), students have to go and work for a year abroad. Students asserted that the incurred expenses ran into hundreds of Euros! Expenses related to flights, travel insurance, health insurances for the year away, deposit for accommodation requirements, administrations fees for eligibility to international internship and use of administrative services within ITS and spending money for the first four weeks until the first wages are issued. Students claimed that just this in itself, necessitated numerous additional working hours, as their average earning rate per hour was below six Euros an hour. Whilst some students mentioned that there were some welcome financial support schemes like Erasmus plus, for example, students argued that these SS were not for all to enjoy.

As indicated in above paragraphs students blamed the institutions for the perceived extended financial hardships. However, the disappointment also extended to central government, as in students' opinion the government failed to provide equally to all students attending national higher and further education.

It's even neglect from the government... cause [because] why is it that other institutions are getting more money?

Claude, ITS

This was in contrast to Therese's extract (page 167) which praised the support received from government.

Challenges relating to work-study balance in student lives

Students urged institutions to release the inflexibility of traditional conceptual practices and embrace the working reality of current learners. Personalisation rather than standardisation of programmes was being requested.

Be more open minded that most of the students at our age need to work. We all know that the course is full time and the weekends should be there to study, but now-a-days one must work too, cause bills like car insurance, petrol, project expenses and school stuff need to be paid. We are grateful that we have 80 Euros monthly but it is simply not enough, thus we need to work to make up for the other stuff that are needed in one's life.

Male, MCAST

If I have a job... be supportive and understand.... [don't] always say that school comes first and that there is no time for work, because work is our future... Be more flexible... students who have experience in the industry should not do basic practical and waste yet another day in school learning things that have already been mastered.

Male, ITS

Students argued that both institutions, could be more supportive of this working reality through the provision of SC time schedules, which take into consideration both the academic and work related needs of the students. In fact, the unfriendly timetables

received by students gave an uncaring image of the institutions, one which did not seem to value students' real lives and practical concerns.

Melanie: they decrease the school hours number one. Today we have 5 hours break, can't they put in another day's lessons during this break time?

Jill: there are some who have no transport. If I take the Arriva [the national bus service], I will get home at 10.30 p.m. [lesson finishes at 6.30]

Phil: I know students who start at 8 finish at 4 and go straight to work till 3 am and wake up for the 8.30 lesson.... Everyday [this happens] not say twice a week.

An excerpt from an ITS focus group

The timetables should be better. Sometimes we get a lesson in the morning then another in the evening with all that wasted time in the middle. It is not worth it for some to get back home with the travel time. It's insane.

Female, MCAST

Difficult familial situations or financial challenges related to course work expenses, affect the psychological wellbeing of students which in turn has implications for their education and learning.

5.4 Emotional Challenges faced by Students

When asked how institutions could improve support for personal and emotional challenges, respondents asserted that, 'it is hard to tell ... as everyone is different and faces struggles' and thus support is to be provided 'depending on the issues'. Below is a positive experience of support received.

ITS has helped me a lot to overcome my social challenges and get to where I am today. From there I've made a lot of true friends!

Female, ITS

Overall, the responses were less positive. The diversity in responses has also been noted in the way students viewed possible institutional support interventions. Whilst some students suggested that institutions can support students 'by doing nothing' ...

Family matters stay in the family. Unless it is abuse on the student you have no right to get involved.

Female, ITS

Simple, LEAVE US ALONE ...

Male, ITS

I wouldn't want the school interfering with my life unless I ask for help. As a person with social anxiety, its' very hard to interact with others and I feel irritated when others force me to speak up. I would keep [stick] to providing support at the guidance counsellor for those who need help or wish to make a change in their life but shouldn't be forced to.

Female, ITS

Others, expected the institution to hear the 'problems and giving [them] solutions'. While it was tempting to read the responses of not wanting help from the institution, as stemming from a contemporary individualistic, neoliberal outlook, it seemed more plausible that these responses were also a result of distrust in the institution to act appropriately. Students urged institutions to respect the boundaries of private or family affairs. This could also be a result of a traditional culture within Maltese institutions and society that sees seeking therapeutic help outside of one's immediate family/friends circle as unnecessary.

Therefore, whilst respecting individual students' choices not to utilise SSS, it seems reasonable to hold the view, that institutions more especially national public ones, cannot regard some psychosocial issues (sustained social factors which affect the psychological wellbeing of an individual) as external to the learning environment. Thus, providing support for the students who are inclined to reach out, as well as building a culture where seeking such support is not surrounded by social stigma, seems a logical way forward. This seems important because students (such as the one providing the quote below), can clearly see how the world outside the classroom environment was inevitably affecting learning (Weissberg and Cascarino, 2013).

I have a Downs syndrome brother, separated parents, alcoholic mother, plus I'm dyslexic. No one in the school cares!

Mike, ITS

One of the areas of enquiry was the exploration of students' perceived challenges arising from personal or familial issues. The results suggested that 40% of the overall respondents (from ITS and MCAST), faced social challenges. These appeared to be slightly more prominent amongst MCAST respondents (41% vs 38%). Fourteen percent of MCAST respondents also asserted that they 'strongly agreed' to the presence of social challenges, whilst only 10% of ITS respondents claimed that they 'strongly agreed'.

Additionally, I attempted to explore students' perceived emotional issues. Twenty-six indicators had been originally presented within the online questionnaire. Whilst I was compiling the list of possible indicators that could challenge the emotional and therefore psychological wellbeing of students, I did anticipate that students might relate to some of the presented indicators. However, the results obtained have significantly surprised me, in terms of the very high percentages reported. The listed indicators were further merged into seven overarching themes: namely, Anxiety Related issues; Depressive Related Issues; Food Issues; Addictions; Anger Issues; Academic issue; Social Related issues. Results for each theme as well as average of responses from both institutions can be seen in appendices 13 and 14 respectively.

Since this study cannot provide detailed analysis of each of these reported figures, further research is needed as these suggestive results raise concerns about the wellness of the student populations. In a study by Cefai and Camilleri (2009), which examined the perceived health and lifestyle of Maltese university students, some similarities in ratings were noted. In both studies, anxiety and depression-related issues ranked the most common psychological conditions amongst respondents. The authors assert, that anxiety and depression fall under the mental health difficulties and in citing Eisenberg et al. (2007), the authors affirm that students who suffer from these difficulties, are usually reluctant to seek professional help. This renders more appropriate the students' suggested intervention reach-out programmes (in the previous chapter), where students are exposed to universal preventative interventions with the hope, that these awareness programmes lead such persons to take on more targeted or intensive personalised support intervention (University of South Florida, 2011; Kame'enui, 2007; Fuchs and Fuchs, 2007; and Saeki et al., 2011). In fact Cefai and Camilleri (2009:147) specify "while psychological and counselling models of individual help are necessary and crucial for those in need, the accent is on a universal preventative approach which will make it less likely that students will need to seek counselling and specialist support".

Anxiety and Depressive issues

Anxiety and stress levels of both students' populations, were very high (83% for MCAST students and 65% for ITS students [appendix 14]). Figures for anxiety and depressive indicators have recorded higher in MCAST. Unfortunately, as already outlined, due to the lack of direct contact with students at MCAST, this aspect could not be elaborated on. However, within ITS, students asserted that primarily, the causes of their stress were the academic issues coupled with their need to work. This is in congruence with the works of Cefai and Cooper (2006) and Cefai and Camilleri (2009), who posit that linked with the social dimension, the personal emotional reality of each student, is also influenced significantly by academic and organisational factors. The ways in which students talked about academic and psycho-social challenges has been discussed earlier. In this section, I present data that focuses on students' anxiety and well being, as a result of these.

Why does this school continue to increase our problems? Taking myself as an example ... I usually have stress! Especially in THIS school!

Lucy, ITS

There are too many exams to study at one go... You have to cope with work, with school - with school being the most important - but you have to cope with school and with work as with 100 Euro stipend it's not enough...

Male, ITS

This year we are worst off. You have loads more stress... 1) You need to work by force as with the stipend you cannot get by 2) You have loads of assignments and the assignments are not written as last year, but presentations. 3) This year they introduced self-study What time are you going to do this?

Phil, ITS

These extracts reinforce the points made earlier in this chapter that relate to the poor organization of courses and the lack of support for the psycho-social challenges faced. In agreement with Karkouti (2014), Cefai and Camilleri (2009) posit that everyone deals with stress, anxiety and frustration in different ways. Cefai and Cooper (2006) argue that whilst some 'act in' (social withdrawal, extreme passivity etc.), others 'act out' (aggression, non-compliant behavior, vandalism and bullying). In fact, frustration and aggression have emerged considerably in this study. For example, irritability ranked 61% at MCAST and 46% at ITS. Violent behaviour on the other hand, ranked higher within ITS (10%) than within MCAST (6%).

Negative emotions and poor experiences, inevitably impacted negatively on students' psychological health and general morale levels. In particular, mood swings were affected as well as levels of motivation and levels of self-esteem. The quantitative findings showed that respondents in MCAST ranked 65% for levels of 'mood swings', 62% in 'loss of motivation' and 54% for 'low self-esteem'. ITS ranked 56% for 'mood swings', 53% for

'loss of motivation' and 52% for 'low self-esteem'. The findings of this study suggest, that whilst some students managed to cope with the realities that they were exposed to, others, more particularly those with *extreme* low self-esteem, motivation and significant health concerns did not and hence required more flexible support systems.

Allow a personal break for those who have mental health issues and harmful experiences (e.g. suicidal thoughts) to spend time with family and ease oneself from school worries.

Male, MCAST

General Addictions

The above paragraphs show that students are strained at all levels (inclusive of psychological and physical level). In their effort to fit in everything, some students were inevitably failing to look after their physical and psychological wellness. Some students admitted to sleeping little and when they had time to sleep, their body did not allow them to. As indicated in appendix 14, Insomnia rated 48% from MCAST respondents and 34% from ITS respondents. As well as not getting enough rest, the lack of time at hand and the implied rushing about, did not help students eat well either.

This coming Friday I have work till 1 am. The following day I have work at 6 am so I am barely going to sleep... when are you going to study? ...you don't feel like studying, you have to go to school obviously when you are tired, there is lack of concentration and lack of motivation to do anything ... problems of appetite, this all combines together then ...

According to Cefai and Camilleri (2009), students adopted unhealthy habits (such as smoking, alcohol consumption and an unhealthy diet), in order to cope with their academic stress. In fact students at MCAST recorded a remarkable 'appetite loss/increase' of 59% and ITS students recorded a 52%. Whilst the adoption of certain unhealthy habits may be acceptable for short periods (ibid), the study suggests that these coping mechanisms were possibly being used also in the long term (which indicated that issues were not superficial).

In addition to these general unhealthy habits, the issue of the use of ‘un-prescribed’ drugs was taken up both within the online questionnaire, as well as taken within the students’ focus groups. The results for the online questionnaire showed that 4% of MCAST respondents used un-prescribed drugs, whilst at ITS 9% of respondents used un-prescribed drugs. The results for the ITS students’ focus groups, although indicative, showed that over half of the participants, asserted that substance abuse was present within ITS, with 10% of these, claiming that substance abuse was ‘yes, very much present’. Worth-noting that whilst discussing reasons for the use of drugs, students had contrasting views. For example, whilst some students asserted that students took drugs because of the problems in ITS, others categorically refuted this claim, stating that drugs were taken because one chose to.

Franz: There are certain students [who] are taking drugs because of this school miss!

Myself: Because of this school?

Franz: Bil break down li hawn miss [with the breakdown there is miss]

Tom: Not true!

Franz: That is how YOU see it, but there are those who do, it is true.

Tom: For God sake, you take drugs because you want MAN! ... You are falling low... [ridiculing yourself] You take drugs because you want!

Franz: Matter of opinion.

Lucy: there ARE those who take drugs in the school.

Tom: A few [do]. But NOT because of the school! ... To take drugs I wait for the weekend and slump myself under a small wall!! [General laughter] ... rather than wait until I come to school!

An excerpt from students' focus groups from ITS

Some students however, tried to justify use of drugs for reasons which were individualistic and possibly, also motivated by external factors.

I don't think they are taking drugs for nothing unless they do it to show off... But ... one does not live without drugs because... I don't know... stress and things like that.

Lucy, ITS

However, Tom stuck by his view that addictions were sought by those who clearly searched for the specific addiction and were not 'sucked' into it because it was handed out to them.

Certain students talk without experiencing things... sometimes an alcoholic is not an alcoholic because he wants to. At the end of the day YOU decide. You can go to a primary school or you can go to the square of wherever you want, the things [drugs] you take them because you want to. Because you look for them, not because they come and say here have ... [drug] for free! They are going to come to you and you think they are going to hand you things just like that? ... Certain things you do not know them man!

Tom, ITS

5.5 To conclude

The main arguments brought up in this chapter relate to three main themes: the academic and organisational; the financial; and the emotional challenges. Academic work was cited as the biggest challenge. Students argued that the programmes and related assessment structures, were not effective and were not meeting basic requirements and students'

expectations. In the same vein, the provision of academic support in each institution was found to be inadequate, as students claimed their real needs were ignored.

Within both institutions, whilst preferring the overall approaches of academic staff to the general administrative staff, students urged for more professionalism, dedication, flexibility, sensitivity and empathy towards them. In their attempts to navigate the organisation students also claimed that they experienced managerial, organisational and coordination inefficiencies. Students felt that systems and services remained inconceivably rigid and bureaucratic, outdated and above all unresponsive to their individual needs. Students affirmed that within ITS especially, administrative staff were negligent, demonstrated lack of commitment and interest in one's work. More alarmingly students posited a poor organisation climate inclusive of incivility, aggression and abuse. Students claimed that industry too, was unsatisfied with the quality of training provided and as a result, the number and quality of placements offered to students were being negatively affected. This augmented students' dissociation with the institution.

The findings of this study suggests, that whilst some students managed to cope with the realities that they were exposed to, others with *extreme* low self-esteem, motivation and significant health concerns did not. On an emotional level, this study shows that students were significantly strained. Within ITS more particularly, students asserted that primarily, the causes of their stress were the academic issues, coupled with their need to work. This requirement further exacerbated existing individual and familial issues. Students felt that both institutions struggled to accept and support this evolving student need to study and work simultaneously. In general, students solicit the personalisation rather than standardisation of programmes, services and support received.

If what students reported in these data chapters about the curriculum, its assessment methodology and its faculty and relative supporting staff and students' services were true, these claims bring to the fore, significant institutional lacunas; namely, academic, organisational, and quality-related in nature. These experiences together with students' perceived emotional needs and evident poor coping mechanisms, help set the scene for discussion chapter, which brings up the central theoretical framing of my thesis - namely SCE as opposed to a one-size-fit-all education system.

Chapter 6

‘Whether we like it or not, as educators [administrators, general support staff and policy makers], we are dealing with a whole range of differences and it is only when we learn to recognise our students’ strengths and listen to their individual voices that we can say we have an inclusive [learning environment]. It may also be the answer to giving the learner his entitlement.’

Agius Ferrante, 2012:79

MHVE - Need for Power Sharing: Voice, Autonomy and Respect

Whilst the previous two chapters explore in detail the findings of this study, this chapter critically considers also in relation to literature, the central research question:

- * How do students view and experience the MHVE system?

The emergent main themes in broad terms, represent the main sections of this chapter and include: the disillusioning reality of MHVE and the students' appeal for voice, autonomy and respect.

6.1 The disillusioning reality of MHVE

Society is changing and young persons have been mostly affected by these changes (Eurofound, 2012). This in turn brings about changes and diversity among student populations and youth in general (the Parliamentary Secretariat for Research, Innovation, Youth and Sport, 2015) which are significantly amplified within HVE also due to increased student access to HE institutions. Additionally, HVE is a vulnerable time for students since it is a time when students find themselves in the adolescent period of turbulence and 'storms and stresses' (ibid). The adolescent period can in some circumstances also be viewed as a period of growth and natural self development (Santrock, 2014). From either perspective, it seems that students join MHVE at a period of high transformation and vulnerability which merits nurturing, tolerance and understanding (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012).

Based on my fieldwork experiences, I argue that students, aware of their vulnerability nevertheless, join MHVE with energy, hope and expectations, not only to succeed on a vocational and professional level, but also to succeed on a personal level. However, this study also shows that once students settle within the higher vocational institutions, they experience a sharp anticlimax, primarily due to disillusionment caused by failed expectations, lack of empowerment, as well as unbalanced power relations.

6.1.1 MHVE - A one-size-fits-all mechanistic and bureaucratic system

As elaborated in chapters 4 and 5, students claim that their disillusionment was primarily caused by the inflexible, irrelevant and ineffective curriculum and unacknowledged abusive aspects of the education system. The claimed inflexibility and ineffectiveness of systems, was not only found within the content of the educational programmes, but also within the structures and interaction processes of the institutions. These findings suggest, that the stifling atmosphere whilst supporting the control component, also “deprive[d] versus encourage[d] creative autonomous work and learning” (high formalisation), whilst the perceived centralisation of institutional decision-making (resting primarily on registrar/boards/management), augment[ed] bureaucracy whilst also disseminated “a non-participatory environment that reduce[d] communication, commitment, and involvement” (Tran and Tian 2013:230).

Unarguably, constant changes effected by different ‘managements’ within ITS in particular, had a cascading effect on everyone as the ongoing radical/sudden changes made in curricula and in institutional policies coupled with the limited communication affected negatively, both administrative and academic services within the institute. Students’ perceptions of the current MHVE structure as seen in my study, strike me as similar if not identical to the one Beattie (2012:158) used to describe secondary schools, claiming that the latter are:

‘... Founded on an industrial era model. They [schools] remain inflexible, constrained by rigid schedules and compartmentalised learning. Students tend to be passive recipients of their education, assuming few decision-making roles. Uniformity and obedience are highly prized by adults.’

For the participants of this study, the rigidity of the systems (including the support systems) reflected a mechanistic framework rather than an organic one. To this effect, students seem to favour the cessation of the impersonal framework (Fielding, 2001) for a more flexible (‘need to provide extension of deadlines [for sick student]’), multilateral approach (‘where quality and timing of feedback received from lecturers is also looked

into’), whereby administrators, as well as academics, are not restricted by rules and regulations but are empowered to exercise their discretion and responsibility when required, with a degree of professionalism (Daft, 2012). The excerpt below links to the concepts put forward by Pijl and Frissen (2009).

‘Sometimes you have to go beyond the law of the school and be more open minded and evaluate every situation in a different manner.’

Male, ITS

Pijl and Frissen (ibid) argue that professional bureaucracy provides a more humane approach than a machine bureaucracy, as the latter, is totally systems-based (therefore, not SC), and takes no consideration of the internal and external environments (ibid). The suggested professional bureaucracy, stands in contrast to students’ analogy of their experience within MHVE to that of a prison, clearly implying that the harness used in Coates’ (2010) interpretation of contemporary HE (as related in the literature chapter), is so tightly set on students that it is stifling them. In more mundane terms, the MHVE structure can be said to take a coercive approach to behaviour management and not a developmental one (Lyons et al. 2011).

6.1.2 Unbalanced Power Relations at the core of MHVE

While students acknowledged diversity amongst the key players of the institutions (management; general administrative and support staff; lecturers; and themselves as students), overall there was a feeling that these were distinct groups, placed differently and not interlinked within the hierarchy and power relations of the institution. The latter power relations (as is discussed in the next few paragraphs), weigh heavily on students’ wellbeing, academic and general dispositions.

‘It’s not fair. For them, we are never right’

Paula, ITS

Students felt that their individual rights were not safeguarded and upheld. This is in contrast with national educational policy documents, which posit that what “gives reassurance to students [is] that our education system is trustworthy and their interests are being safeguarded.” (NCFHE, 2016:15)

Students felt that if they did not meet a single obligation they were faced with consequences, often severe, whilst when their rights were not safeguarded or upheld by any member of the institution, there were no consequences. This general perception, provoked within students, feelings of unfairness and injustice. These feelings were further amplified, when students were made to feel they were wrong in matters where they felt they were not at fault. This also seemed to affect student self-image within the institutions. This is shown in Elvis’ contribution, who in describing the effects of lack of recreational facilities within ITS, referred to a sense of helplessness and submission (page 96). We also have Andrew’s and Timothy’s contributions, which implied that the systems and interpersonal approaches within ITS were undignified and corrosive to students’ autonomy and self respect.

This study reveals that in spite of these problems, there were instances when students unsuccessfully tried to take control of their learning.

This has been going on for too long! We need to make our voices heard and since the student council is not doing anything - and I do not want to offend anyone by this - we need to speak up for our rights. The timetables handed out, and the subjects mentioned are pointless, useless and a waste of our time. ITS needs to wake up and see that this is not the right system! Help us, better yet help YOURSELVES to achieving your career goals because ITS's Board and administrative personnel are not doing [this] and do not care about our futures.

An excerpt from the ITS Students’ online Petition (October 2014),
(forwarded to me by a participant of the focus groups).

Students claimed that following the publication of the above petition, students were summoned to a meeting in the main hall. At the time, students felt that their attempt to take control and provoke the institution to respond to their educational plight, brought about a ‘coerced’ inversion of power in favour of students, which momentarily provided them with an opportunity to make themselves heard both internally and externally. However, students stated that this opportunity was short lived. More specifically, students claimed that the aftermath of such extreme action, only brought about further problems, as they claimed to have been punished for their attempt to voice their concerns. Students argued that certain aspects promised within the meeting, were not upheld by the institute, resulting in a doubled disappointment in the institution. For example, within the meeting between students and the management of the institution, students were promised more kitchen hours within the second semester, but according to participants of this study, this promise did not materialise. Even worse, students asserted that since the negative media coverage, they no longer had wi-fi or Facebook access on campus premises.

Why is Facebook blocked? f’gieh kemm hemm ta! [For heaven’s sake], we’re not kids here! I understand certain sites are to be blocked... Imma [but] not websites of social media ... I am sorry Facebook is not a distraction ...Facebook should be embraced. Social media should be embraced!

Tom, ITS

Freeman (2014) claims that something similar took place in the post-92 institutions, when students’ informal use of social media was viewed by educational institutions as problematic and as an unregulated space for SV. Freeman posits that when students express negative views about the institutions, the latter feel students have not understood the notion of acceptable behaviour and as such, are seen as deviant and dangerous. Based on this interpretation the institution concerned, seeks to forcefully control through ‘disciplinary’ measures, this undesirable type of SV for the ‘good of the reputation of the institution, and for the good of the student and their future employability’ (ibid:233).

When faced with such reference to ‘employability’, students’ claimed that they were not at work yet and thus, were ‘in the process of learning what it takes to be at work’. Therefore they expected more flexibility and understanding of their educational and developmental needs and realities. With regard to discipline, students asserted that they were in favour of discipline, but they argued that discipline should not be over exerted on those students who could not meet the rules due to extenuating circumstances. For example, students claimed that there could be personal or physical reasons preventing students from meeting set academic deadlines. These were not given due consideration.

Students argued that forceful control and implied mistreatment, derived predominantly (but not exclusively) from the administrative offices. In fact students perceived the academic staff more helpful than administrative staff. This finding is similar to the finding of a study carried out in 2009 in the Maltese university, where “students perceive the non-academic staff somewhat less supportive than the academic staff ...” (Cefai and Camilleri, 2009:84). However, the latter study, in contrast to mine, showed a mixed students’ feeling in this regard. In fact, final year students thought that “non academic staff [wa]s more helpful and supportive than 1st or 2nd year students, suggesting that new-comers d[id] not feel their needs [we]re being adequately addressed by the non academic staff” (ibid).

Yang et al. (2014) argue that individual mistreatment falls under various forms, namely: incivility, aggression, and bullying. According to Yang et al. (ibid), forms of mistreatment also differ in terms of intensity; incivility is expressed with the lowest intensity (for example; being ignored or excluded), physical aggression has the highest intensity, whereas nonphysical aggression and bullying, falls in between incivility and physical aggression in terms of intensity (ibid:315). This study has not only shown the presence of mistreatment, but it has also shown that mistreatment is present in all range of intensities, with students suggesting that these experiences, instilled in them a sense of fear and humiliation.

For Cefai and Cooper (2010), managing students behaviour through fear and public humiliation is nothing but a ‘quick fix’, that becomes self-defeating in the long term. Such fear-based relationships are more likely to lead to alienation, a sense of helplessness and eventually disengagement (ibid:193). Freeman (2014) in agreement with Denton (2003)

and Newman (1992), imply that behind such extreme institutional reactions, lies nothing but a masked fear of the power of the informal SV and in accordance to Cook-Sather (2006:381), also a reluctance to “letting go of what we think we know and entertaining the possibility of profoundly repositioning students in educational research and reform”.

This study concludes that students are yearning for this repositioning in educational reform. So much so, that in their total disregard of the institution’s ability to treat them fairly, they also voiced an opinion of how they would like to be involved through the use of the petition and meetings that followed. But students noted that when they had been asked over for the post-petition meeting, students were not met collectively but were divided into two groups. For students, this made no sense at all. They felt that they would have preferred to meet as one whole group, so that arising issues could have been discussed by all students and not just within the group where a particular subject arose. However, they claimed to have had no say in the matter.

Two different meetings? Maybe first he said something (the director) about something, he answered in a way and then in the next meeting, he answered in another way?

Male, ITS

The mistrust in the institutions also extended to the SSS, which in students’ opinion, adopted an over-professionalised, systems-based approach at the best times. Consequently students were reluctant to reach out and seek help when required. So students not only felt isolated from the institution, but when within it, they also felt insecure and overwhelmed by their psychosocial, academic, and financial challenges. The pressure of all these rendered students susceptible to adopting confrontational, defensive roles.

Checkering and Gamson (1987:2) argue “there are neither enough carrots nor sticks (referring to McGregor leadership theory), to improve undergraduate education without the commitment and action of students and faculty members. They are the precious resources on whom the improvement of undergraduate education depends”. This study argues, however, that in a higher vocational setting, the enhancement of education also depends on

the internal staff (at all levels), who inevitably determine the structures of communications and inclusion, and thus, the structures for SV and student involvement.

6.2 Voice, Autonomy and Respect

Students continuously argued that institutions did not take into consideration their views and concerns in matters which intimately affected their lives and future careers. Students expected to be consulted and involved in reforms and continuous development of the education programme since they are the ones being most affected by it. The fact that they could not speak, let alone contribute to its enhancement was very hard for them to understand or accept, as they posited that as direct recipients of this education, they had some 'expertise', that could significantly contribute to improvements.

... Because at the end of the day the students are the ones that are learning. The students are the ... foundation of the school. They're what makes the school not the teachers.

Male, ITS

It's our school, we're part of it... the school is a body, we are the body they're the head, but if they don't know how to read us, we're just gonna be a headless body... how can you change a system when the student does not know what is happening...

Mary, ITS

In spite of students' views on their right to be involved, students claimed that in reality their opinion did not matter.

'hux [as if] we do! As if *ANYONE* has interest in us!'

Paula, ITS

The results showed that 60% of participants from MCAST's online questionnaire asserted that their opinion did not matter. Coincidentally 60% of students participating in the ITS focus groups also asserted that their opinion did not matter. Students specified that it was

more with the administrative staff, that they felt their opinion did not matter, as they claimed that with some teachers/lecturers, they felt that their opinion did count. This implies that SV, even if present, is not effective.

Beattie (2012:158) claims, that students found within the ‘industrial era model’ [the inflexible one-size-fit-all models of Hargreaves (2006), Stoddard and Standard-Examiner (2012) and Fielding (2008)] are prevented from developing their SV to the extent that they are actually ‘unlearning how to use [one’s] voice’ (Beattie 2012:158). Beattie claims that such situations render students’ academic experiences even more damaging, as it goes against the natural adolescent developing journey. I find her claims even more significant in a higher vocational setting, where students are older and where the denial of students’ “bedrock principle ... to be treated with respect and as a partner in the learning enterprise...” (Wolfendale and Corbett, 1996:3) seriously affects and delays students’ developing personal and social identities.

Beattie (2012:158) poses a very pertinent self reflective question, which I find sits well with the findings and argument of my thesis because, as indicated in the literature review chapter, the aims of national education systems, is to encourage and support students to develop their full potential so as to generate a national human capital (Matovac et al., 2010), which not only can compete in tomorrow’s globalised economies, but which can provide sur petition for the country (go beyond competition and be avanguard [De Bono, 1992]).

Why then, at a time when adolescents most need to affirm their identity and value in the world, do we ask them to become passive, obedient, and voiceless? What is the cost of this reality for all students, but particularly for those who already feel devalued and disempowered?

It is evident in this study that students are harnessed into becoming ‘passive, obedient and voiceless.’ The following excerpts supports this claim.

‘We are studying for Chefs right? All right, we come here, they give us the time table, we have lectures that are NOT relevant to chefs and [which] we already covered... we are doing them as they wanted. Did we tell them that we are not happy? Yes! Did they listen to us? No! ... They shouted at us!’

Lorna, ITS

In the extract above, Lorna managed to sum up many issues which have frequently been referred to by other participants of this study. More specifically, Lorna highlighted the three main foci of this section: namely, lack of respect for SV (‘did we tell them that we are not happy? Yes! Did they listen to us? No!’); lack of student autonomy (‘we are doing them [the course] as they wanted’); and the inappropriate use of authority and control (‘they shouted at us!’). Overall students feel they have no voice, no autonomy and receive no respect.

Beattie (2012) who advocates the benefits of SV on students’ self development, also implies that SV contributes to the betterment of HE. However, she also believes it is a complex accomplishment which requires significant effort and abundant support from all concerned. Although Beattie (2012) is in favour of SV, she argues in agreement with Cook-Sather (2006), that transforming learning environments to meet this philosophy is not easy, as it involves the gradually shifting of the power dynamics of the same educational systems. In this case, SV becomes but one mechanism in the transformation of students as fully fledged ‘partners’ in their education.

But this research clearly shows that this is not happening in MHVE. As indicated in the excerpt below, this could be also due to the lack of regard for students’ collaborating ability as well as to the internalised concept of student’s positioning within the organisation.

‘Student participation is not currently foreseen in the formal curriculum development procedure, nor are they involved in any of the institutional bodies charged with programme approval (Curriculum Development unit, Programme Approval Board). On an informal level, the vast majority of staff members feel that they

are in very close communication with students and thereby in a position to observe and express students' expectations. ... The decision not to include students formally in the programme design process was a conscious one by the MCAST management based on the conviction that input from students to necessary programme learning outcomes, competences and curricular content for new subjects would be rather limited, while generally being convinced that students' needs were sufficiently taken into account by the staff members involved in these processes.'

NCFHE, External Audit Report for MCAST (2016:22)

MCAST's decision (as implied in the above extract), not to view students' as competent partners in curriculum design is in line with Elwood's (2013) view, that SV is not usually permitted at higher levels of decision making.

Seale (2015:19) depicts SV initiatives in HE as a "‘good thing to do', which means that the issues and tensions surrounding the field (i.e. power relationships and ethics) are not always critiqued or problematised." This does not reflect the reality of the institutions in question. On academic terms, Seale's view is in contrast to Freeman (2014), who argues that whilst it is within students' rights to express negative opinions, this can bring about complication to students, if what they have to say, is different to the wider group and more especially, if such is interpreted as 'illegitimate' inference by the institutions. It hence follows that such reaction brings about total incoherence of the institutions who may orally or promotionally promote SV, whilst on practical levels they fiercely oppose it thus inhibiting students from taking charge of their academic learning.

Student Autonomy

According to student respondents, lack of SV was not the only demoralising issue they experienced within MHVE. Students claimed that they also felt that they could not take charge of their academic learning as they argued, that each time they tried, they had to reconsider as their attempts were met with unequal, paternalistic or patronising exchanges.

Magolda (2009) argues, that any attempts of student authorship/autonomy, in this case, where the student set out to take control of his/her own learning ('...me, this and this subject, I already did them'), should be encouraged and developed and not consciously or unconsciously muzzled ('you keep them, maybe they [content] change). Magolda (ibid) implies that a patronising approach may halt students' self-development as these experiences may discourage future self-initiation processes and that this in turn, may delay if not regress, the holistic self-development of young adults. Additionally, if what the students alleged was true, it followed, that 'gagging' (whether intentional or not) student's instinctive attempts to think critically, problem solve and take initiative, contrasted significantly with HVE targets set up at international and national levels (European Commission, 2012:3), to raise the quality of vocational skills and to ensure that young people, were able to be entrepreneurial, competitive and adapt to the increasing and rapid changes in the labour market.

Students also commented on the quality of decisions made on their behalf and which in turn affected their educational journey. Students questioned whether it was the right call for clerical staff to take academic decisions, or whether it was better if students' academic requests were passed onto the right academic channels for further review. From the research, it emerged that such 'inappropriate' decisions were taken on a very regular basis. The students posited that in view of their experiences, the established academic decision-making structures found within the institute (in this case the board of studies), were solely of a decorative nature.

If as this study portrays, student general autonomy was stifled due to the existing educational system in addition of the lack of regard shown for students' collaborating ability, it follows in the manner of self-fulfilling prophecies, that students cannot in turn be expected to be effective autonomous learners. Zandvliet et al. (2014) claim that autonomous learning requires competence as well as the fulfilment of one's need for autonomy and need for relatedness. For these authors both the need for autonomy and the presence of relatedness (connection with the institution), in each student is required to generate integration of values as well as internalisation of regulatory acceptance. Furthermore, Zandvliet et al. (2014) imply that if any of the three needs are missing or not

fully provided for - as in the case of this study (which faults in student autonomy and institutional integration), it will affect the quality and extent of autonomous learning.

Such a poor consideration of students made participants feel unimportant and not relevant to the institution. This brought about feelings of frustration, helplessness, and as already indicated, loss of credibility in the institutions. This loss of trust and credibility contributed to students distancing themselves (detachment) and in turn rendered sense of belonging/relatedness and subsequent student integration (Tinto, 2006) and engagement (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012 and Borg and Calleja, 2006) fairly improbable, especially within ITS.

Primarily, when students are experiencing disaffection and disengagement, they would not understand the purpose of what they are asked to do within the school (or classroom environment) and its relevance to their lives outside the school/classroom. Should the justifications they receive to their queries made results futile, the students would feel that in complying they would have lost control over their learning as it limits renegotiation of experiences within their self. Consequently, many students may find it difficult to relate to such a situation and thus resort to their mode of thinking which subconsciously restores equity within oneself (Sears et al., 1985). This mode of thinking generates two main types of behaviour, namely confrontation (violence and disruptive behaviour) or withdrawal (truant behaviour).

Truant behaviour can be in the form of 'physical truancy' or 'truant in mind'. Physical truancy is when the student has high absenteeism rates (basically inciting self-exclusion from the programmes of studies undertaken), while students who play truant in mind, remain physically present in the school/classrooms, but do not participate within the learning activities. This implies that both behaviours (physical [since they are not present in classroom] and truant in mind [since student is not participating in the activities of the classroom]), gradually make the disaffected student fall academically behind and consequently slip, into the risk of academic failure also known as youth at risk category (Borg and Calleja, 2006).

Linking the above two paragraphs to my study, it is evident that students were not connected to the institutions. Students in fact admitted, that they were getting better

experience in their part-time work. The fact that they felt better fulfilment from part-time work (attachment at work not at school) and through this work students also addressed their financial needs, it followed that students worked more and in so doing, pushed studies aside. Collins (1998) argues that effective learning requires active participation. If effective learning requires active participation it follows, that if students are detached from the school they take a passive approach to learning, which in turn implies that effective learning is not even taking place.

Since academic deadlines still had to be met, students felt the increase of academic pressure and in their effort to address these, anxiety levels together with levels of tiredness, insomnia and depression were further augmented (appendix 13 and 14). It appears that students' exhaustive attempts to address increasing pressures, further impinged on their levels of self-esteem, motivation, general wellbeing and even resiliency. In the process some students, it seems, resort to general addictions and anger expression/withdrawal as coping mechanisms.

In fact, the quantitative findings show a considerable extent of mental health issues, which cannot be ignored. The figures although not representative, are still alarming at face value, and indicative of poor emotional health of students. It is for this reason, that urgent qualitative bio-psychosocial interventions (where you have the environment, the individual and the quality of interaction in between [Riddick, 2009]), are solicited. If these issues remain unresolved, it follows that students' bio-psychosocial wellness deters and inevitably, continues to impede on the student from focusing on the academic content and through discretionary behaviour, resist or act passively to the learning process (Borg and Calleja, 2006).

Thus, policy makers and administrators, are urged to evaluate students' emotional wellbeing (or lack of it as this study argues) and reconsider the individuals' psychological as well as academic benefits (inclusive of organisational and national benefits), of putting the student at the centre of all decisions. However, for these revised SC practices to be effective, these practices and supporting structures, need to be fuelled by a sincere concern for students' development and general wellbeing, rather than being fuelled by tokenistic (Arnstein, 1969) reactive responses to external political, economical or quality assurance

influences. One must remember that with each failing/withdrawing student, the opportunities for work become limited and the chances to end up on benefits and part of NEET population increases (Borg and Calleja, 2006). This is a lose-lose situation for the student, for the organisation and for society in general.

This study reveals, that most definitely there is a gap between the provision of HVE (inclusive of SSS) and students' needs and expectations. This research suggests that the most effective way to lessen the gap, is to adopt SCE approaches aimed at developing students and not on coercively managing them.

6.3 Suggested Way Forward

This study argues that more should be done in HVE to try and understand students evolving needs, as students found that the institutions not only were unsympathetic but also lacked effective reach out strategies to address their needs. Students' perceived lack of support also from their families, even though respondents of this study affirmed that most of their families understood them. The realities of the social background of participants of the study indicate, that families may have a coalescence of health issues, matrimonial and financial problems and that the students do not wish to add to these issues. So in students words, they are trying to take the situation in hand and do something about it (seek authorship and agency), but this is at a cost to their study time, their leisure and sleep time and their overall physical and emotional well-being.

Students solicit the transformation of the existing impersonal school system to a caring school culture where there is respect, kindness, fairness and in agreement with Agius Ferrante (2012:283) also a "sense of social responsibility in their behaviour and interactions with others".

Students are requesting institutions to

"Be more understanding of the student by allowing them to voice their opinions and struggles and actually given priority."

Female, MCAST

To reach this quality of education and make students feel more respected and recognised, organisational structures, cultures and climates needs to embrace a more SC ethos within a democratic milieu (Lyons et al., 2011). Additionally, it is suggested that the role of SSS ceases to be at the periphery of the education experience and takes a more central role, whilst providing universal intervention programmes intended to develop students' social and emotional learning domains which in turn will augment, students' self reflective and problem-solving skills whilst at the same time promote authorship and resilience competencies across student populations (Conley et al., 2013).

When students were asked how they would like to be reached, a student said:

'I think the management needs to, you know ... STEP FORWARD and they would be the ones to ask us, not we have to go and ask for permission to give our problems. I think they [management] need to take more of an initiative so that they can change things in my opinion...'

Jim, ITS

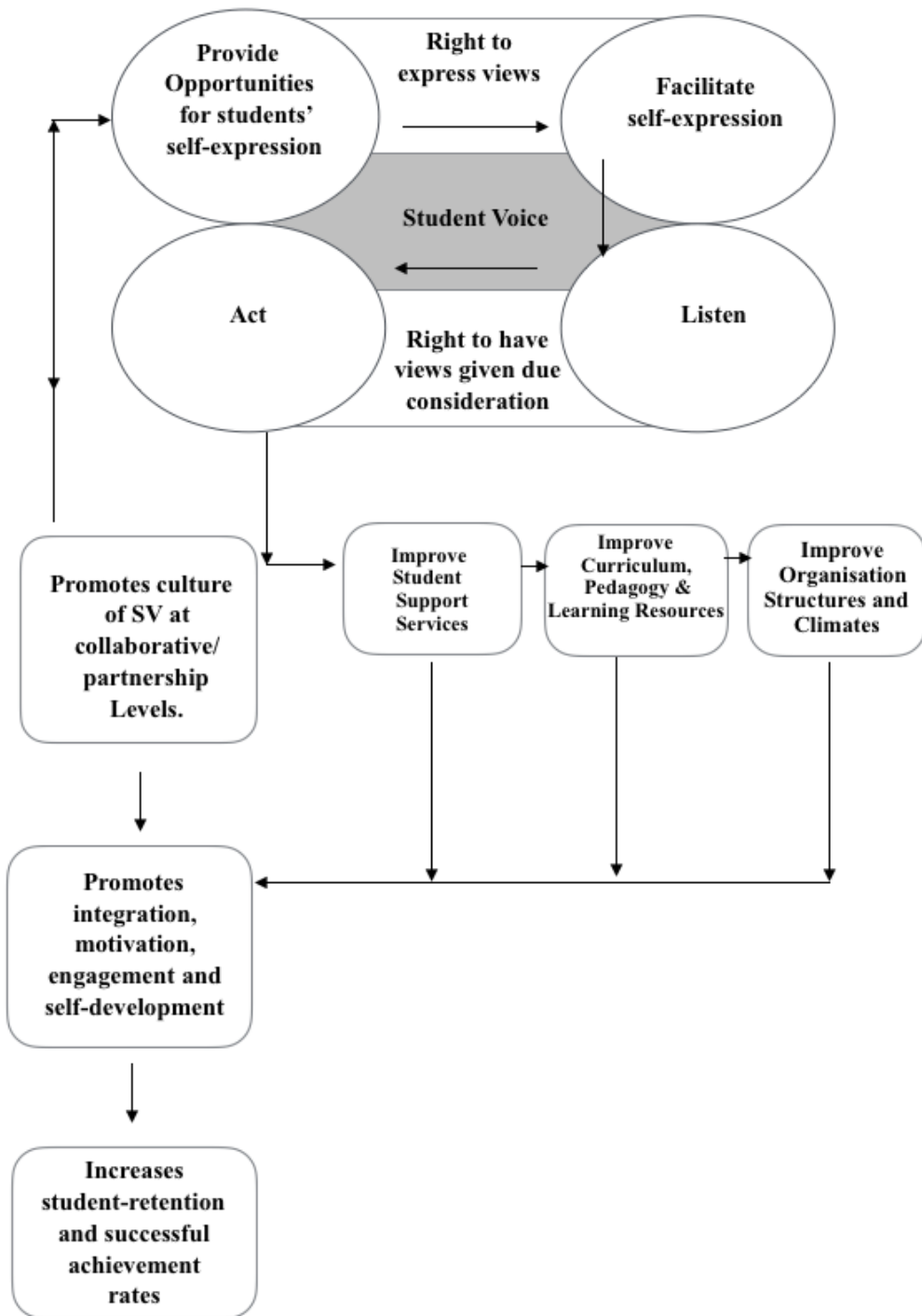
Another student suggested to 'be in our [students'] shoes'! I explained, that in spite of the best intentions, it was not easy for mature people to 'slip back' into shoes of 16/19 year olds, so I also asked them to guide us and tell us how to reach them effectively. The initial reply was 'hafna affarijiet [that we could reach them in many ways]... For example they requested 'posters', 'adverts on these new tvs' [internal monitors], and the organisation of meetings (awareness talks), with adequate notice. Students claimed that it was not important, if only few attended as those who did attend, still acquired the knowledge which they may still utilise when facing a difficult decision. Additionally for these students, the few who attended could first be addressed at a group level and then at a personal level. This is in line with the universal response intervention approach used in SSS, which first reaches out all students on generic grounds and then provides more specific in-depth preventative and possibly also intensive interventions on individual levels (University of South Florida, 2011; Fuchs and Fuchs, 2007; and Conley et al., 2013).

For most of the participants of this study, the MHVE system was set in stone. But it emerged that the effects of this system also depended on the personality of the student. Taking Claude and Cindy's interventions as an example, both students 'fell' within the 'abled students' category. Both students took the rigidity and inflexibility of the system as a challenge and 'grit their teeth' and tried harder to succeed. However, not all students (particularly those vulnerable and at risk of academic failure), have the same resiliency level - especially at times of high adversity (Borg and Calleja, 2006). Students in this study argued, that in their uniqueness and resulting diversity, they have varying levels of fear and resilience, academic abilities and psychosocial (and financial) realities. Students wished they had the opportunity to truly make their unique realities heard.

As already discussed in chapter 2, the provision of an 'opportunity' (a *space*/channel for communication) is not enough to render SV effective (Bain, 2010). Bain asserts that this opportunity needs to be *facilitated* (students should be encouraged and reassured that they can *voice* their opinion without consequences) and heard by the respective authorities (an *audience*). SV requires that the information received, is not only heard, but is also listened to and acted upon appropriately (*influence*). Since the provision of the '*Space*, the *Voice*, the *Audience* and the *Influence*' fall within the remit of the institution, I conclude that for Bain, the effectiveness of the process is primarily dependent on the institution.

However, this research shows that SV opportunities provided in MHVE are basic and primarily fall within the 'tokenism' (Toshalis and Nakkula's model)/'data sources' (Arnstein's model) categories. As a theoretical contribution, in figure 3, I have adapted Bain's child assessment model (appendix 5), to reflect participants' (and my) understanding, of what would constitute effective SV opportunities within HVE. More specifically I have taken Bains' work which is mostly classroom based and applied it to the whole institution. This proposed change of focus, has been driven by literature (chapter 2) but more especially by students' requests.

Figure 3: A possible framework for effective SV within MHVE



I find that this suggested model also interlinks with Toshalis and Nakkula and Arnstein's models because SV of this research, has confirmed that it is not just superficial voice that students want. Students want to be listened to. They want their opinions duly considered and above all they would like to see that their suggestions are being applied.

With this structure in place (on paper as well as on practical terms), students' learning experience, as well as curriculum (and related SSS) and organisation structures and climate will be significantly enhanced. Cook-Sather (2006), however, claims that although spaces for SV may be provided (as also in figure 3), she believes that the full aspiration of SV cannot be achieved (to see the students acting as equals and partners in the education system) unless organisation structures and cultures are further explored.

Students, in agreement, are very much aware that to achieve this level of SV, the whole educational culture needs to change, but ultimately they are also aware, that such reform will generate better rules, structures, processes, roles and relationships. Amongst the constructive solutions offered by students, we find those which urge institutions to: support students by helping them build resilience (*'the main thing that can be done is to help students carry on with their studies instead of giving up'*); reduce and restructure workloads (*'plan, plan, plan'*); encourage and promote reach out programmes (*'offer a 15 min appointment per month to see if all is going well'*); promote effectively existing SS (*'Counsellor doesn't really make themselves known. I forget they are there'*), whilst ensuring availability and accessibility of SS once sought (*'when I needed to use them they were fully booked!'*); introduce more social groups and school activities (inclusive of outings and awareness talks); show more understanding and flexibility to the *'needs and limitations'* of students (*'if for example a family member is in hospital, student should be exempted to visit and stay with his/her family member'*); and create a positive environment with more common areas for socialising within the school (*'By going to school and having a good day, it will reflect our attitudes when we go back home'*).

The same student participation will help to slowly redirect these services into becoming fully SC. This involvement of students will not only benefit the suitability and quality of services rendered, but also help to generate an awareness that students are in fact partners in the learning process (Wolfendale and Corbett, 1996). It is hoped that this recognition (together with the right curriculum, teaching methodologies etc.), will increase student self-esteem and encourage more involvement, integration and communication within the learning environment. This will in turn increase levels of motivation and engagement, thereby also increasing student successful completion rates and simultaneously increase student retention rates!

6.4 To conclude

This study shows that students' preexisting psychosocial challenges (inclusive of normal adolescent issues), were significantly worsened by the perceived obstructive and ineffective education system which in students' opinions lacked respect, care and also presented no significant place for students to voice their needs and experiences. The perceived limitations suggested in this study, illustrates a lack of accountability to the student populations. There clearly appears a discourse of 'rights and responsibilities' for the students, but students claim that the same does not apply to the institutions.

Undeniably and as already indicated, education is a difficult problem to be solved by no one simple formula (Ramsden, 1992:109) but as seen in this study, SV and involvement not only gives deeper insight into the multifaceted aspect of the 'difficult problem', but also provides feasible solutions to presented problems and concerns. The next chapter will provide the general conclusions of this research study and will also delineate future directions and recommendations for future study.

Chapter 7

‘Students are not the problem; they are part of the solution, perhaps the most critical part, and their voices are the missing link.’

Beattie, 2012:160

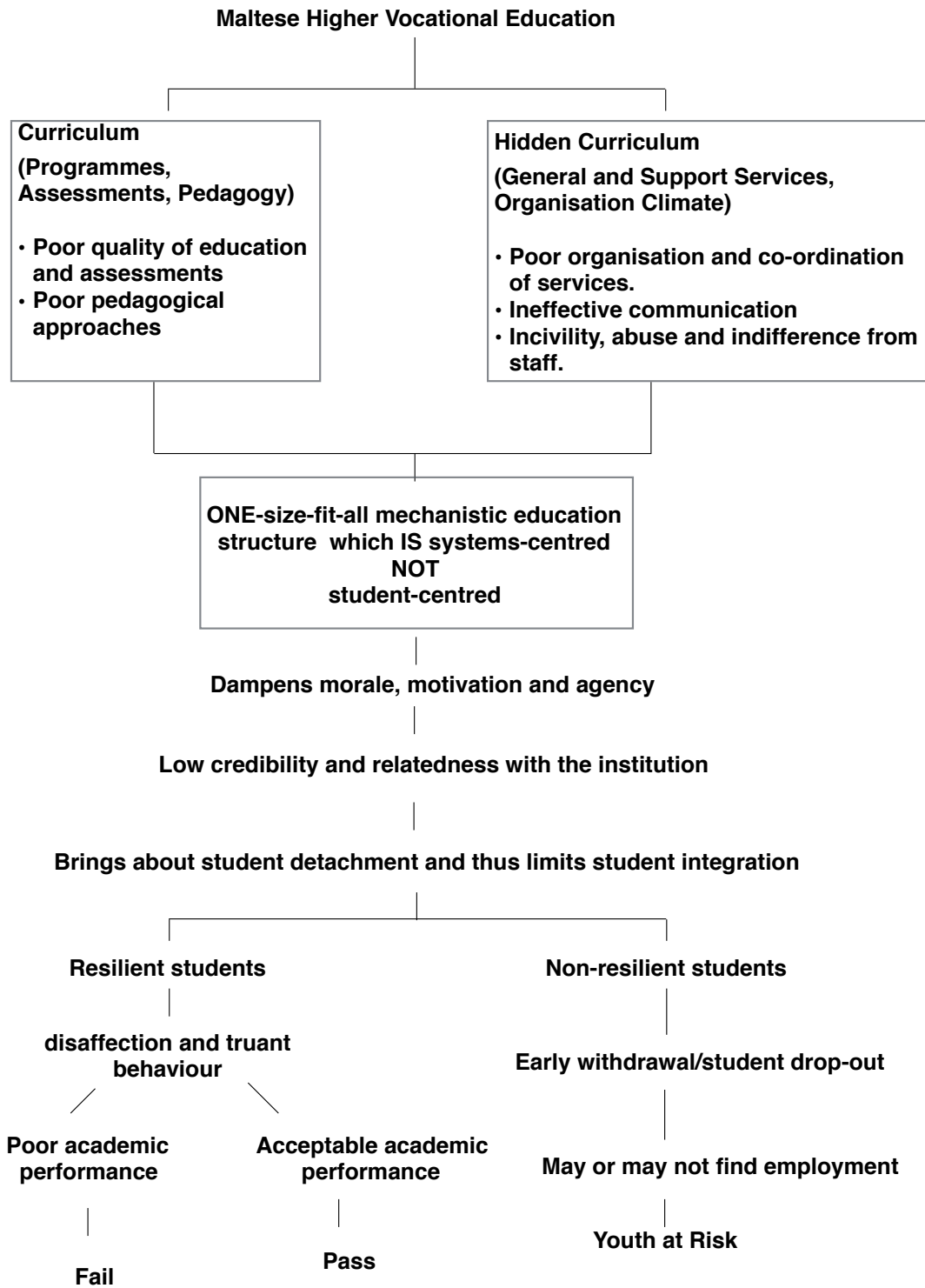
Conclusions, Future Directions and Recommendations

This empirical research investigated students' perceptions on the provision of MHVE and its related support structures and how these, impacted their experience and educational journey. This study also explored students' challenges and in the process of this, the influence and limitations of the educational institutions as a whole, have also been addressed. The data of this research, has been primarily gathered from a total of 295 students from both MHVE institutions. Additionally, familiarisation to institutional practices has been secured through interactions with 18 administrative and support staff representatives from both institutions which as explained in the methodology chapters, the latter findings of which, have not been included to give more voice to students experiences and related perceptions.

The findings of this thesis suggest, that a lot of effort is put in the provision of HVE in Malta. Many of these efforts which have been noted by students namely include the provision of: free education; a monthly stipend; support in finding national and international experiential learning (work placements); as well as the provision of emotional support when requested by students or when found necessary by educational representatives. In contrast, however, the study also claims that the MHVE system as a whole, is based on conformity and not diversity. More specifically, students argue that all services provided are based on a one-size-fit-all system, where they are expected to comply and fit in to succeed. A visual representation of conclusive findings in this regard is included in Figure 4.

From the analysis of feedback of participants of this study, it conclusively emerged that for students, the HVE system in Malta is not SC. According to the students, the system is not even teacher-centred but it is administrative/system-centred. A system which they claimed to be uncaring and oblivious to their increasing coalescence of academic and psychosocial challenges.

Figure 4: Visual Representation of Participants' experiences



Students claimed that they did not perceive such a high regard towards them. In fact, students on the whole, did not feel respected, valued and listened to. For the participants of this study, if this credibility towards them was within both empirical settings, it would have been evidenced through active, effective and humane interpersonal approaches, inclusive of SV and student authorship/autonomy opportunities. The findings also show that the power structures within the institutions are unbalanced and inclusive of a mixture of institutional approaches, ranging from patronising approaches to uncivil and significantly, abusive approaches. To this effect, the findings show that students' preexisting psychosocial, financial and academic challenges were significantly extenuated by the perceived archaic, obstructive and ineffective MHVE system provided (inclusive of SSS). This research claims that existing SSS are not sufficient to meet the increasing student diverse needs and hence more investment and resourcing is required, more especially within ITS where SSS are found to be significantly limited and unstructured. This study posits that SSS are positioned on the periphery of the education system and the same services provided, are generally reactive and not proactive to students' emerging needs.

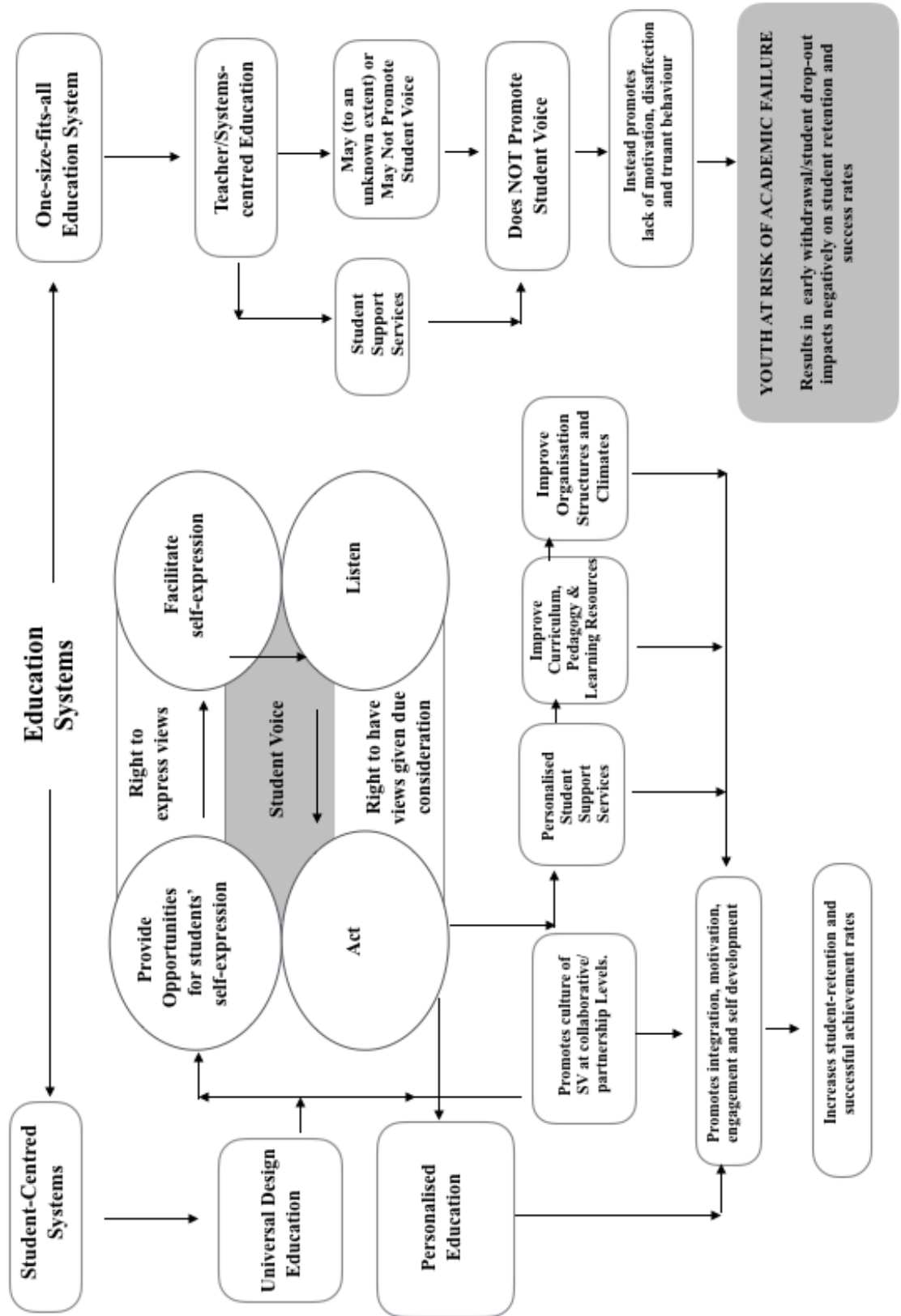
The findings clearly demonstrate that there is a significant gap (especially within ITS), between students evolving needs and the provision of SSS in MHVE. The results also show that students' exhaustive unsuccessful attempts to address these increasing pressures, further impinged on their existing volatile levels of self-esteem, motivation and general wellbeing. In fact, this study portrayed considerable mental health issues. More perturbingly students' self-esteem and motivation levels, were further 'hit' by the perceived lack of autonomy, voice and respect sustained from educational institutions in matters effecting their personal and academic advancement. Overall the study (especially within ITS), shows significant traits of disengagement and lack of connectedness with the institutions, which automatically put students at risk of academic withdrawal and academic failure.

Whilst recognising the ongoing national, organisational and individual efforts put into the provision of MHVE and most particularly in the provision of SSS, this study argues that a lot still needs to be done in order to bring MHVE in line with :

1. **Students-centred learning environments**, where students are seen (and treated) as senior partners in the education process and not merely seen as malleable ‘beneficiaries’, who irrespective of the quality and relevance of the education provided, should be expected to comply respectfully.
2. **Supportive Organisation climates** which promote collaboration and self development and not individualisation and demoralisation. Ones where all members, feel comfortable, secure and valued. Ones which ultimately nurture and cultivate physical and psychological wellness for *all* its diverse and unique members.
3. Organic **organisation structures** instead of existing mechanistic ones, which as this study suggests, are inhibiting (if not stifling) students’ autonomy and voice and which in the process of this, are also negatively effecting students’ moral, motivation and self-esteem.
4. **SSS** which are also shaped and developed by students experiences and evolving needs. Ones which reach out universally to students (then progress individually if required), to provide preventative instead of the current reactive SS.

MHVE today has undeniably many pressures and constraints, but this begs one to revise the purpose of MHVE and how should it organise itself. What should its central organisation principle be? My thesis suggests it should be student-centredness that lies at its core, with other issues being supplementary. Figure 5 delineates a summative visual representation of my understanding of the two main education systems as emerged from the literature review and empirical settings. More specifically, I argue in favour of SCE system which is founded on the UDE approach and which provides effective collaborative and partnership SV opportunities to allow students, ‘the treasures in our back yard’ (Bain, 2010:18) to share their insights on PE approaches required to better satisfy their unique needs. As this study suggests, such an organic system would significantly benefit students and educational institutions alike.

Figure 5: The impact of SV in SCE Systems and One-size-fits-all Education Systems



7.1 The contribution of this study

On a conceptual level, my thesis is about improving MHV experiences through proactive universal design interventions and greater involvement of students in the design and personalisation of education and related SSS. On practical terms, however, I feel that my thesis is a needed addition to the scarce academic research found about MHVE. The topics this thesis discusses, are varied yet all significant. Primarily we see the distinction between a one-size-fits-all education system (which represents MHVE as a whole) and SCE system. My contribution to theory is the adaptation of Bain's child assessment model (appendix 5), to reflect a framework for effective SV provision within HVE (figure 3). I am also putting forward a model (figure 5), which reflects the impact of SV (or its absence), in both SCE system and one-size-fits-all system as argued in this thesis. Both models have been borrowed from classroom-based concepts and repositioned onto the whole institution, to help create the right conditions for students' institutional integration and relatedness, which in agreement with Tinto (2006), I find is a prerequisite to academic engagement.

My contribution to practice, on the other hand, informs the effective provision of SC learning environments (and related SSS), as well as the provision of supportive organisation climates and structures. Additionally, my study illustrates that the experience of contemporary students in MHVE, requires an ethos of student-centredness or service which is not left at the periphery, but made central to educational goals - something that again runs through the whole institution, taking into account student experience of academic, financial and organisational challenges and reforming all these areas of practice, from this central perspective.

This thesis also contributed to my personal professional growth. As an educator, the realisation of what HVE was *really* doing to students shocked me greatly, especially as I am part of the system causing this aggravation to students. In my mind, before this thesis, I thought I was SC, but realising that this thesis helped me to 'listen differently' to students, made me understand that I was not as SC as I thought to be. I experienced that listening differently to students' accounts themselves, forced a revision or at least, a questioning of the ways students are cared for within HVE in Malta. This has helped me

improve my services and approaches with students. Furthermore, this research allowed me to gain an understanding of students' lives.

7.2 The limitations of the study and suggested areas for further research:

My research has painted a broad, if at times, ugly picture of the functioning of the MHV institutions as a whole. The study started off in a small way, as it first focused on the provision of SSS and related students' needs, but then it branched out in very diverse ways, following the student concerns. This thesis therefore, incorporates a broad brush picture of different themes in the provision of MHVE rather than a detailed picture of each particular theme. Although I find this study purposeful in its own way (since it holds sufficient information to suggest the need for improvement within MHVE), I argue the need for future research which can look in more detail at the areas that I go on to outline. Furthermore, I assert that in view of the distinct characteristics of the two main MHV institutions, investigations within each institution should be conducted independently from the other. Amongst the themes for further investigation, I am suggesting that SV is specifically explored on four main domains: namely, students wellness; truancy (inclusive of levels of engagement and integration); curricula and related pedagogy; and organisation culture. Since this study focuses only on students' experiences and voices, I am also suggesting that lecturers' voices are also collected in future studies.

7.3 To conclude

SCE has brought about changes in content, systems provided as well as in the dynamics and orientation of the student populations (Levine and Dean, 2012). According to Levine and Dean (2012), the pace and complexity of change among students and institutions is likely to increase even more, thus magnifying the complexity and significance of SSS.

The attempts of support systems to address individual student needs is becoming increasingly significant, since education systems are allegedly trying to adapt to the diverse student populations, instead of expecting the student populations to adapt to the standardised school systems (Ministry of Education, 2004). This is because learning support recognises that students have different learning needs, study at different rates and

paces and have varied learning styles (Volmari et al., 2009). Students also establish different goals to satisfy their needs and take different actions to achieve these goals (Armstrong, 2006). Therefore, it follows that a one-size-fits-all education ethos (inclusive of support system), may not correspond to the evolving and interchanging needs of the diverse student populations (Volmari et al., 2009). This also implies that the mere provision of education (again inclusive of support system), does not necessarily guarantee effective and qualitative provision. For SCE systems to be effective, educators, administrators and general staff operating behind and within these systems, need to have a genuine commitment to the total well-being of the students. These systems need to be fuelled by a sincere concern for students' development rather than merely being a response to external political, economical or quality assurance orientations.

This study showed that in spite of all efforts made, experience within MHVE did not satisfy participants' needs and expectations. On the contrary, within one particular institution more especially, we see the extreme negative effects the provision of an uncaring (inclusive of incivility and bullying [as indicated in chapter 5]), disorganised and ineffective educational environment (inclusive of its curricula, pedagogical approaches and support systems [as indicated in chapter 4 and 5]), had on its student population. The impact of these voiceless 'damaged' experiences, not only negatively affected institutional integration and ultimate academic engagement, but also negatively affected students' emotional wellness. The narratives of the participants of this study, emanated disappointment and resentment toward *all* members of the system, for being made to feel degraded and invisible, in a place which primarily (at vocational level), was founded to help students not only fulfil their career aspirations, but also their citizenship potential.

Flutter and Ruddock (2004), in citing a question of Michael Fullan's (1991:170) enquires "What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?" Thirteen years from Fullan's question, the authors posited that persons involved in education were then, in a better position to answer that question. Twenty-five years later, Fullan's question remains relevant to the MHVE system. I also argue, that in an attempt to answer this question, all persons working within the MHVE field (inclusive of policy makers), have an implied choice. One can either continue to think about things from one's own (self-reassuring) perspective, concluding things are not as bad as they are perceived to

be by the same service users - the students (thus remaining within in the educational 'locked system' identified by Edward De Bono), or one can courageously decide to take a leap into the unknown and look at the realistic provision of MHVE as seen through the lens of the direct service users (the students) and collaboratively with students, design the appropriate way forward.

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Appendix 1 **The Maltese Islands**

The Maltese Archipelago (a total of 315.6 km²), consists of a group of five small islands in the centre of the Mediterranean, 93 km south of Sicily and 290 km from north of Libya (National Statistics Office, 2012:iii). The Islands include (amongst other uninhabited islets and rocks such as Kemmunett and Filfla) three main inhabited islands with the larger Island Malta (245.7 km²), followed by Gozo (67.1 km²), and Comino (2.8 km²) (Schembri, 1997).



Figure 1: <http://www.users.waitrose.com/~nhalstead/Malta.html>

Figure 2: http://arthistoryworlds.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2.europe_malta_map_location.gif



In 2013, the Maltese population was that of 425,384 inhabitants (Cedefop, 2014). The Maltese are multilingual and have Maltese and English as the official languages (National Statistics Office, 2012). Throughout history Malta has evolved through successive conquests by Arabs, Normans, and other Europeans including the British (ibid). In fact, Malta gained independence from Britain in 1964 and became a Republic in 1974 (ibid). Malta also became an EU Member State in 2004 and adopted the Euro as its currency in 2008 (Cedefop, 2012:4).

Malta is a small economy with no natural resources. Therefore, government's commitment to develop the human capital as a prerequisite for future progress and 'Sur Petition' (not only be in a position to compete with other countries but be at the forefront of the establishment of the actual competitive edge) for the country (De bono, 1991), underlies the significance and the necessity of adequate investments in the educational system (Matovac, et al., 2010).

Appendix 2 The Maltese Education System

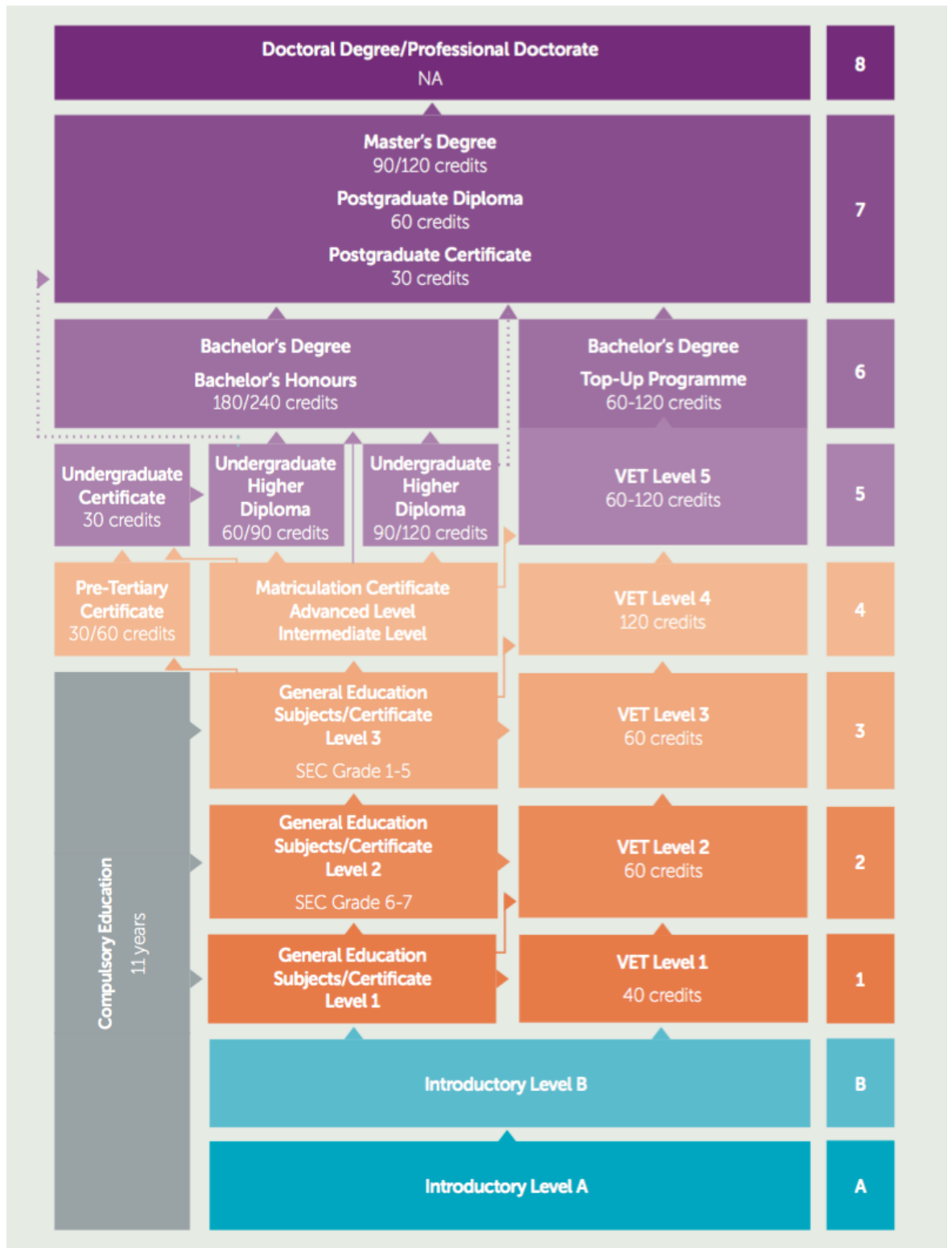
As indicated in the central research question, the focus of this study relates to MHVE; a progressive branch within the national education system. Before explaining the local context of vocational education and its regulatory body, some general information about the national education system will be provided.

State education within the Maltese educational system is free from pre-primary up to tertiary level (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012). The country's education system comprises of pre-primary education (ages 2 years nine months to 4 years nine months), compulsory primary education (ages 5 – 11 years) and compulsory secondary education (ages 11 – 16 years) (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012). After compulsory schooling, Students then have the opportunity to either take the general education or vocational track at post-secondary level (please refer to Appendix 2a). More specifically, sixteen year-old youths can choose whether:-

- 1) To remain in education (and join upper secondary training providers [namely the Junior College] before progressing to the tertiary education [The University of Malta]),
- 2) or to join one of the two national providers of Higher Vocational Education (HVE) namely; MCAST or the ITS.
- 3) or to seek direct employment.

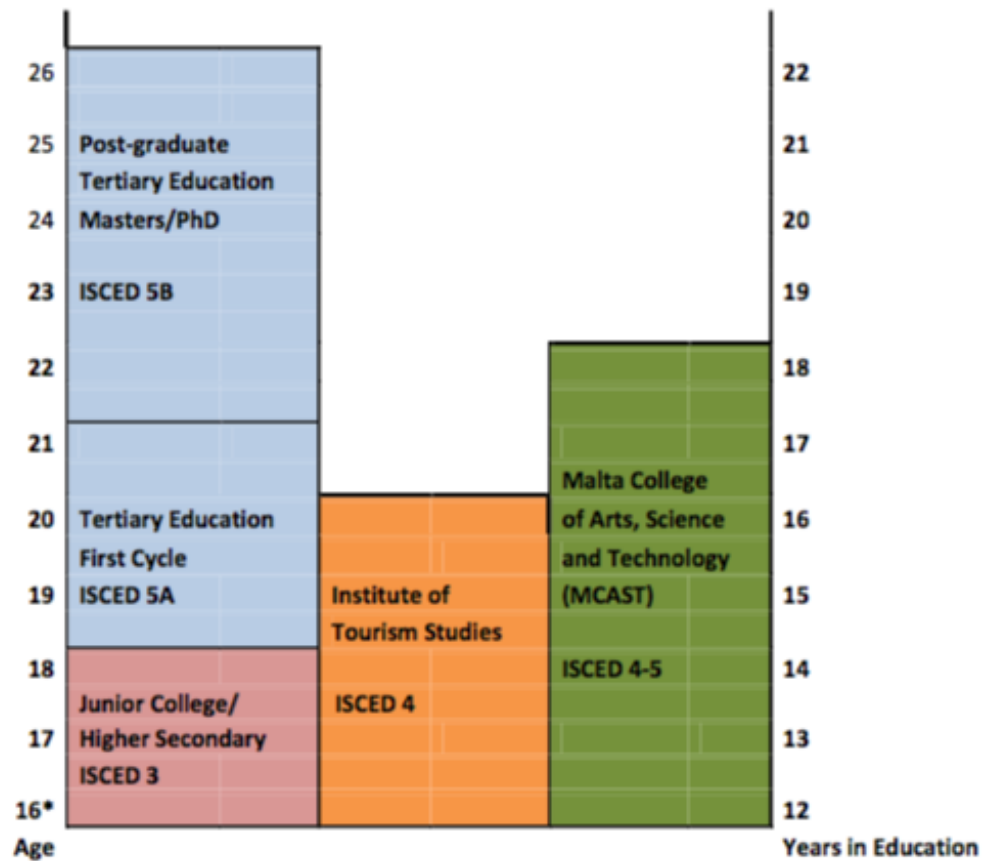
In order to remain within the parameters of this study, the next section will illustrate an overview of the relevance and importance of MHVE and its regulatory body namely, the National Commission for HE respectively.

Diagrammatic Representation of the Education system in Malta



Appendix 2b

Diagrammatic Representation of Post-Compulsory Education System in Malta



- Junior College/ Higher secondary
Post-secondary General education
ISCED 3
- University of Malta
First Cycle - 3-4 years ISCED 5A
Second Cycle - Masters/PhD ISCED 5B
- Institute of Tourism Studies
Successful students can proceed to tertiary
education in Tourism Studies at University
ISCED 4
- Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST)
Post-secondary Vocational Education which builds up
to a tertiary degree
ISCED 4-5

* Compulsory Education ends at age 16.
Compulsory Education includes general education

Appendix 2c (i) The Historical VET Context In Malta

Vocational education in Malta previously known as technical education dates back to the 14th century (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2015). At the time, technical education was related to the building trade, furniture making and silver work amongst others. Technical education was further improved after World War II with the introduction of the 1952 Industrial Training Act which forced employers to invest in the training of their staff. The 1950's and 1960's saw the introduction of technical schools as well as the approval of the building of the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). The latter college offered courses in the areas of Hotel Administration, Commerce and Business Studies, and Civil, Mechanical and Electrical engineering. The College stopped functioning as a vocational school as it was transformed into a 'New' University in 1977 (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2015:5).

In the 70's the compulsory educational system in Malta was restructured. The restructuring involved trade schools being set up for students of ages 14-16. Technical institutes were also consolidated. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, vocational education did not receive the same level of investment as the general and academic HE. In fact, MacDaniel (1999:8) in a bespoke report for the European Commission, states that

“Another area requiring attention... is the present level of funding for vocational education and training. Although Malta has the highest GDP level of expenditure on education in the candidate countries [of this report], expenditure on vocational education and training is by far the lowest”.

In 2001 a significant investment was made to build the new Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) which hosted an umbrella of vocational institutes. This new investment led to a new era of vocational education in Malta, building on the success of the pre-existing Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS). Both institutions had an overall student population of 5,028 in 2008 (NCFHE, 2009:11).

***Appendix 2c (ii)* Contemporary VET context in Malta**

HVE in Malta moved from a unitary system (offered by one state institution only namely, the University of Malta) to a binary system, and is currently an integral part of the implementation of the Lisbon Agenda set by the European Union Member States (Attard, 2008). The Maltese Vocational Education System incorporates but is not exclusive to, the dual education system practiced in Denmark, Germany and a number of other countries whereby the apprentices spend one part of their education and training at a vocational school and another part in a company or firm directly involved in employment environments (Koudahl, 2010). Current reforms in Malta are extending vocational subjects to compulsory education with the opportunity for secondary students to obtain certificates at MQF Level 3 (Ministry for Finance, 2015).

Higher vocational institutions in Malta are licensed, regulated and quality assured by the NCFHE (2013). The NCFHE launched in 2012, incorporates both the Malta Qualifications Council (set up in 2005) as well as the National Commission for Higher Education set up in 2006. The Maltese HVE sector (inclusive of MCAST and ITS) is based on a National Qualification Framework (vide appendix 2ciii) as part of the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes.

Funding for Public higher vocational institutions in Malta is mainly State-funded (Malta Vet in Europe, 2014). Every year each educational institution send their budget forecasts to the Ministry of Finance, and then a financial allocation is made within the yearly national budget. As a result, national and European learners do not incur any tuition fees. On the contrary, students attending Maltese HVE (as well as within other national further and HE institutions) receive a stipend. Details about the stipends are included in appendices 2d.

Appendix 2c (iii) The Maltese Qualifications Framework

8	Doctoral Degree	
7	Master's Degree Post-graduate Diploma Post-graduate Certificate	
6	Bachelor's Degree	
5	Undergraduate Diploma Undergraduate Certificate	VET Higher Diploma Foundation Degree
4	Matriculation Certificate Advanced Level Intermediate Level	VET Diploma (iv)
3	General Education SEC Grade 1-5	VET Level 3 (iii)
2	General Education Level 2 SEC Grade 6-7	VET Level 2 (ii)
1	General Education Level 1 School Leaving Certificate	VET Level 1 (i)
B	Introductory Level B*	
A	Introductory Level A*	

* These are not yet included in legislation

Annotations

- i. A Full VET Level 1 qualification should enjoy the same parity of esteem as a Full Secondary School Certificate and Profile (SSC&P) Level 1.
- ii. A Full VET Level 2 qualification should enjoy the same parity of esteem as 4 Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) subjects at Grade 6 and 7.
- iii. A VET Level 3 Qualification should enjoy the same parity of esteem as 6 Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) subjects at Grades 1 to 5.
- iv. A VET Diploma should enjoy the same parity of esteem as the Matriculation Certificate.

NCFHE, 2016:40

The Malta Qualifications Framework runs from levels 1 – 8, and are equivalent to levels found within the European Qualifications Framework (Cedefop, 2014). Through the National Qualifications Framework, there exists the possibility for all forms of learning (formal, non-formal and informal learning) across compulsory, vocational and academic sectors to be pegged within a single framework.

The following stipends are paid to full-time students who meet the eligible criteria and who are not in full-time employment during the scholastic period.

MQF Level 2
€29.00 per week

MQF Level 3
€29.00 per week

MQF Level 4
€29.00 per week

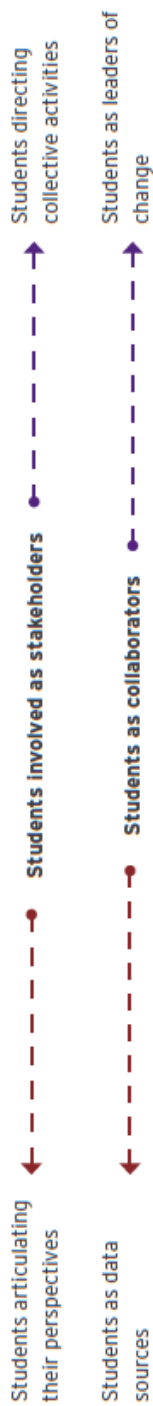
MQF Level 5
1st year student - €46.061 per week
2nd year student - €53.86 per week

The first stipend of the academic year is paid at the end of November. Thereafter stipends are paid every four weeks in arrears. Students receiving a stipend are also entitled to receive half the annual Government bonus and have to pay their National Insurance

extract downloaded from: <http://www.its.edu.mt/courses-admission.html>
(accessed: 28th July 2016 at 11 am)

The Spectrum of Student Voice Oriented Activity Model

THE SPECTRUM OF STUDENT VOICE ORIENTED ACTIVITY

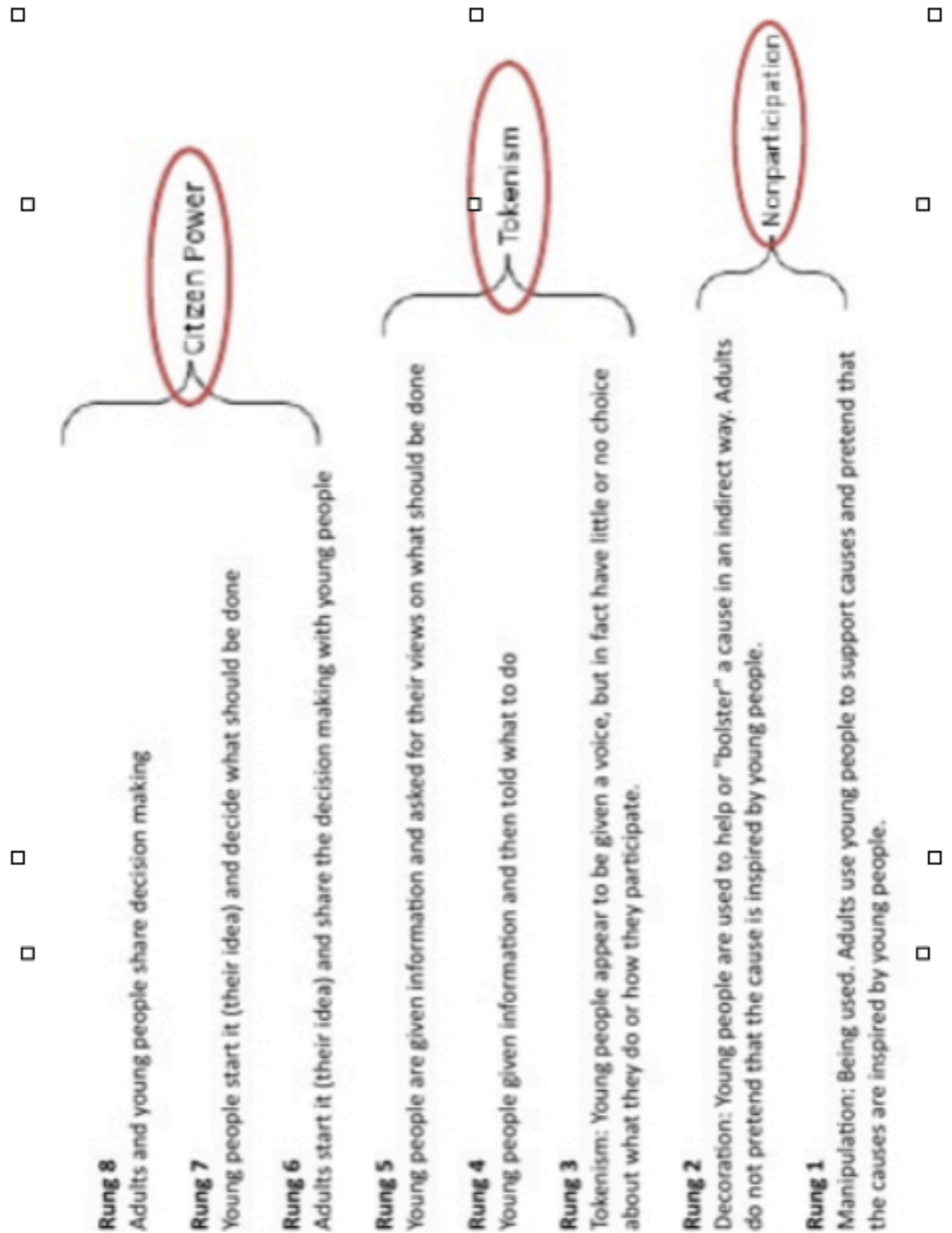


Expression	Consultation	Participation	Partnership	Activism	Leadership
Volunteering opinions, creating art, celebrating, complaining, praising, objecting	Being asked for their opinion, providing feedback, serving on a focus group, completing a survey	Attending meetings or events in which decisions are made, frequent inclusion when issues are framed and actions planned	Formalized role in decision making, standard operations require (not just invite) student involvement, adults are trained in how to work collaboratively with youth partners	Identifying problems, generating solutions, organizing responses, agitating and/or educating for change both in and outside of school contexts	(Co-)Planning, making decisions and accepting significant responsibility for outcomes, (co-)guiding group processes, (co-)conducting activities

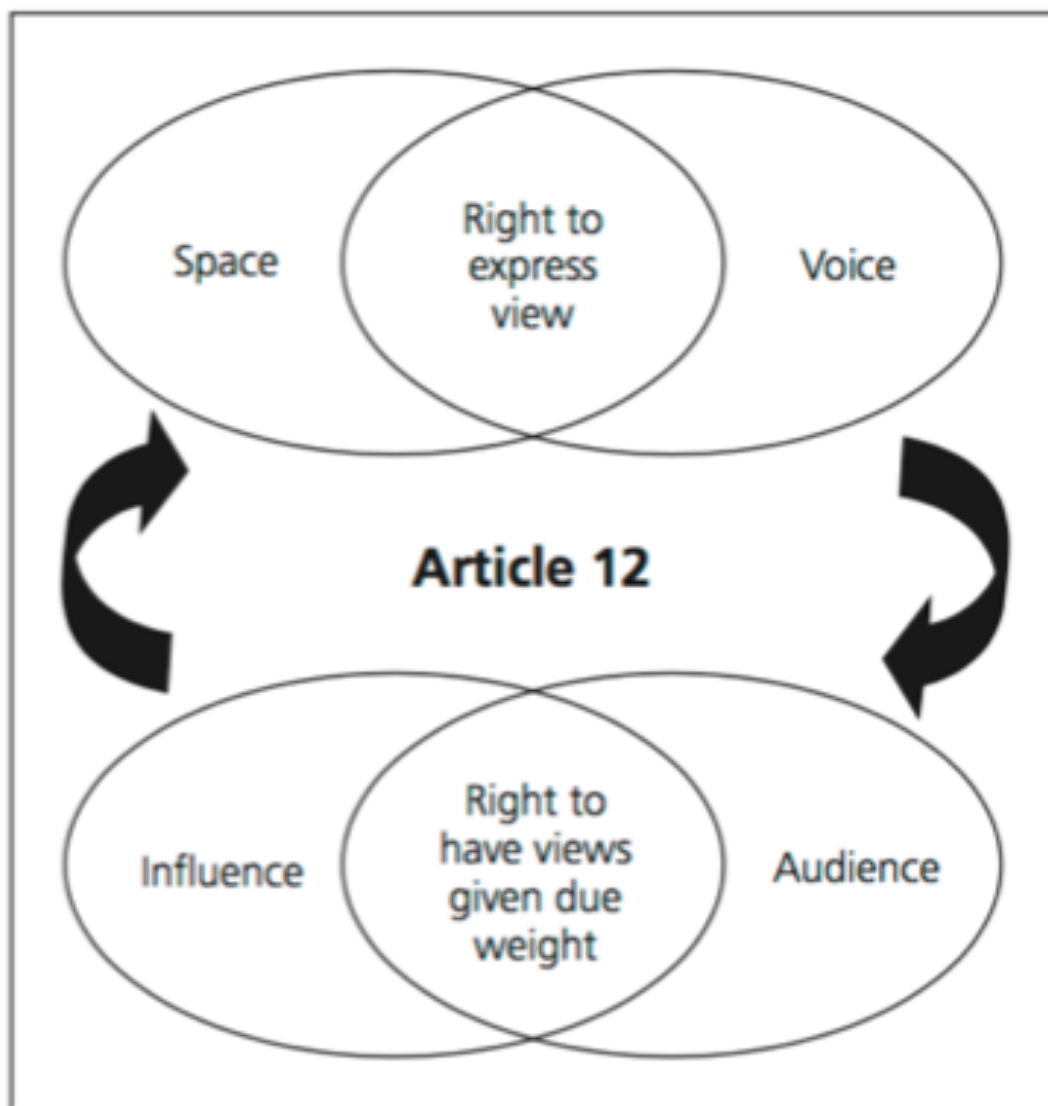
Most student voice activity in schools/classrooms resides at this end of the spectrum.

The need for adults to share authority, demonstrate trust, protect against co-optation, learn from students, and handle disagreement **increases** from left to right.

Students' influence, responsibility, and decision-making roles **increase** from left to right.



Adapted from: <http://image.slidesharecdn.com/communityparticipation-thearnsteinladder-101203080206-phapp02/95/community-participation-the-arnstein-ladder-4-728.jpg?cb=1291385410>

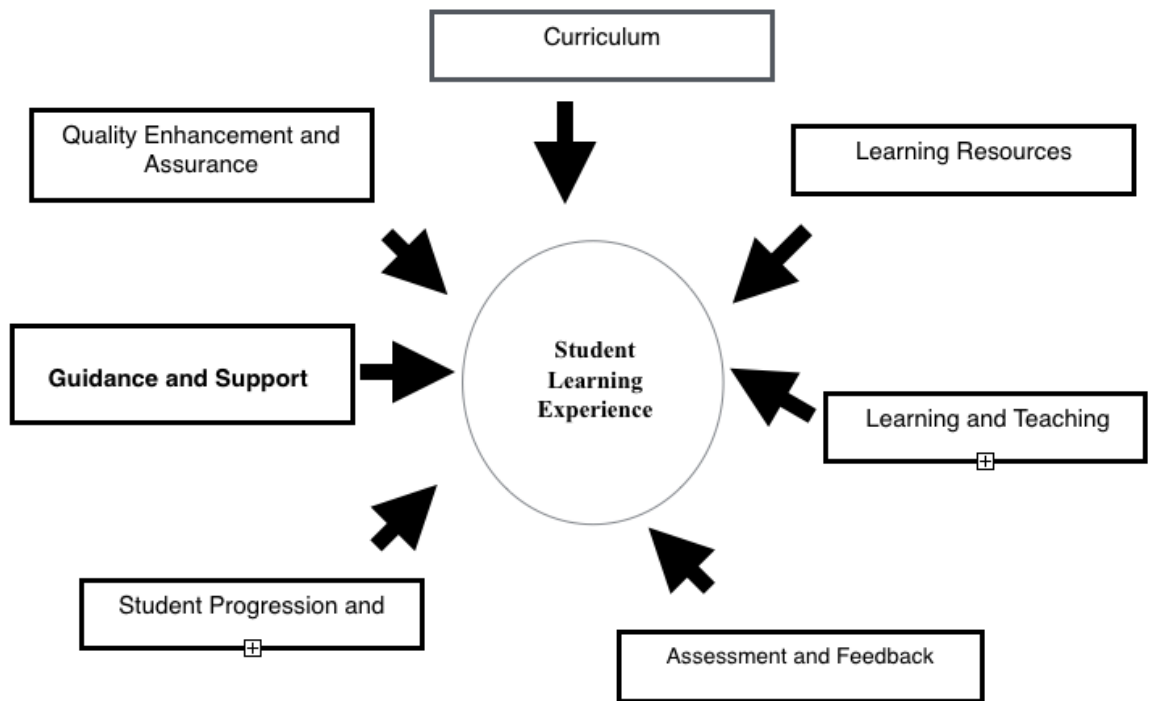


□

Bain, 2010:19

Appendix 6

Elements that impact positively or negatively on Students Learning experience



The European Students Union, 2013:10

*Appendix 7***Participants Representation from MCAST Institutes**

Course followed within the Institute of:	2015 %
Agribusiness	0
Applied Science	12.1
Art and Design	13.1
Building and Construction Engineering	4
Community Services	21.2
Electrical and Electronics Engineering	3
Information and Communication Technology	23.2
Mechanical Engineering	2
Maritime Institute	1
Gozo Centre	2
Business and Commerce	17.2

Students' Voice on 'Student Support Services' provided within MCAST.

Part One - About You

* Required

1. Please indicate your Gender *

Mark only one oval.

- Male
 Female

2. What is your Nationality *

Mark only one oval.

- Maltese National
 European National
 Nationality outside the European Union

3. Which part of Malta do you come from? *

Mark only one oval.

- North of Malta (Mellieha, San Pawl, Qawra etc)
 Central part of Malta (B'Kara, Hamrun, Valletta etc)
 Southern part of Malta (Marsaxlokk, Marsascalea, Birgu, Birzebbuga)

4. How old are you? *

Mark only one oval.

- under 18
 18 - 21
 22 - 25
 26 - 30
 30 - 40
 Over 40

5. Year of Studies *

6. You are following a course within the: *

Mark only one oval.

- Institute of Agribusiness
- Institute of Applied Science
- Institute of Art and Design
- Institute of Building and Construction Engineering
- Institute of Community Services
- Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineering
- Institute of Information and Communication Technology
- Institute of Mechanical Engineering
- Maritime Institute
- Gozo Centre
- Institute of Business and Commerce
- Other:

Part Two - Your honest feedback please

7. Overall, are you satisfied with the Student Support Services provided within MCAST?

Mark only one oval.

- Extremely Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Extremely Dissatisfied
- Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied

8. Please rate each of the following services provided based on YOUR own experience. *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor	I never used this Service
Career Guidance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Chaplaincy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Counselling	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Group Activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inclusive Education Unit	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Learning Support Unit	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
L1 - L2 Courses Moderator	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Magic Wonders Childcare Centre	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Helping Skills Course and the Student-to-Student Network	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Main Building Foyer Information Centre	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Institute Support Services Co-ordinators	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. On average can you indicate the frequency of use of the above services *

Mark only one oval per row.

	once or a couple of times in all	once a week or more	once a month or more	once every few months	I never used this Service
Career Guidance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Chaplaincy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Counselling	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Group Activities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inclusive Education Unit	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Learning Support Unit	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
L1 - L2 Courses Moderator	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Magic Wonders Childcare Centre	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Helping Skills Course and the Student-to-Student Network	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Main Building Foyer Information Centre	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Institute Support Services Co-ordinators	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. Do you think these services reflect ALL your needs as a Student? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No
 Sometimes

11. Do you find these Support Services easily accessible? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

12. Do you feel your needs are understood by: *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Yes	No	Sometimes	Not at All
The Teachers of this Institution	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Management of this Institution	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The General Staff of this Institution	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your Family Members	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your Friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

13. **Do you feel your opinion matters at MCAST? ***

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

14. **Have you ever suggested anything within MCAST which was implemented? ***

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- No but it was favourably considered

15. **If you answered yes to the above question, can you please explain what was your suggestion about?**

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

16. **Do you feel you are coping with your studies? ***

Mark only one oval.

- Always
- Most of the Times
- Sometimes
- Not at All

17. **What challenges do you face whilst studying at MCAST? ***

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Financial Challenges	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Academic (coping with Studies) Challenges	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social (interacting with others) Challenges	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Personal and Family Related Challenges	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work Related Challenges	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

18. How can MCAST support YOU or other Students Financially? *

.....

.....

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.....

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19. How can MCAST support YOU or other Students Academically? *

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20. How can MCAST support YOU or other Students to overcome Social challenges?

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21. How can MCAST support YOU or other Students with Personal and Family related issues?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

22. How can MCAST support YOU or other Students with Employment related issues? *

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Part Three

23. Please tick against any of the following that may apply to you presently, or that may have applied to you in the past. *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Applies to me Presently (last 12 months)	Has applied to me in the Past (anything before 12 months ago)	Has applied to me in the Past and currently still applies	Has never applied to me
Anxiety and Stress	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Poor Concentration	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Panic Attacks	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Irritability (easily angry)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Loneliness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mood Swings	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tearfulness (moments of unexplained crying)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Depression	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Low Self Esteem	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Poor Body Image	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Loss of Motivation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Appetite Loss or Increase in Appetite	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Insomnia (cannot sleep)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Regular Tiredness	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have been Bullied or Abused (emotionally, physically and sexually)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Cannot stop thinking of Food	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Smoking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Drinking issues (feel you need a drink to feel better or forget)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Use of unprescribed Drugs/Stimulants/Steroids	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Violent behaviour	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
have had issues with Police/Courts (this applies also to close family members)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
experienced Fostering and or Residential Homes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
diagnosed learning difficulties / disability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
difficulty in reading	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
difficulty in writing and structuring a sentence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
difficulty in organising tasks and self (including own room)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

THANK YOU for your valuable time in completing this questionnaire. I very much appreciate it. I take this opportunity to wish you all the best in your studies!

Students' focus group - ITS 2015
* Required

1. Please indicate your Gender *
Mark only one oval.

Male
 Female

2. Please indicate your Nationality *
Mark only one oval.

Maltese
 European National
 Nationality outside the European Union

3. Which part of Malta do you come from *
Mark only one oval.

North of Malta (Gozo, Mellieha, San Pawl, Qawra etc)
 Central Part (B'kara, Hamrun, Valletta etc)
 Southern Part of Malta (Marsaxlokk, Marsascala, Birgu, Birzebbuga etc)

4. Do you feel your opinion matters within ITS? *
Mark only one oval.

Yes
 No

5. Have you ever suggested anything within ITS that was implemented? *
Mark only one oval.

Yes
 No
 No, but it was favourably considered

6. If you answered yes to the above question, can you please explain what your suggestion was about?

7. Do you think student general wellbeing is important to succeed in one's course *
Mark only one oval.

- yes
- No

8. Do you think bullying is present within ITS? *
Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

9. Do you think substance abuse is present within ITS *
Mark only one oval.

- Yes, very much present
- Yes present
- No

10. Do you think enough is being done about bullying within ITS? *
Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

11. Do you think enough is being done by ITS to ensure that drugs are not present within ITS? *
Mark only one oval.

- yes
- no

12. what convinced youth join ITS - Please tick as many boxes you find applicable *
Check all that apply.

- no other place to go
- better here than home
- my parents wanted me to come
- I wanted to do a course so that i can work in Industry
- I get a stipend for doing a course
- This course matches my work aspiration
- I wanted to go elsewhere but did not have the right qualifications
- other
- if other, please explain:

13. Are you happy with the course you chose? *

Mark only one oval.

- yes
- No
- Sometimes
- Not sure
- I would if

14. Do you feel proud to be part of ITS? *

Mark only one oval.

- yes
- no

15. In general do you feel you can voice your opinion with: *

Mark only one oval per row.

	yes	no
with Management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
With Lecturers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
With Administrative Staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
With other students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
With Student Council Representatives	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

16. Do you prefer theory sessions or practical sessions? *

Mark only one oval.

- theory sessions
- practical sessions

17. During theory sessions do the lecturers involve students in the interaction? *

Mark only one oval.

- Never
- Sometimes
- Most of the times
- Occasionally

18. Do teachers ask to speak to you after sessions for some reason or another? *

Mark only one oval.

- Never
- Frequently
- Most of them do
- Most of them do not

19. Do lecturers explain the reason for carrying out some activities? *

Mark only one oval.

- yes
- no
- sometimes
- I do not find this relevant

20. Do you participate during lessons? *

Mark only one oval.

- yes
- no
- sometimes
- most of the times

21. Are you disruptive during the sessions? *

Mark only one oval.

- yes
- no
- not sure
- sometimes
- most of the times

22. Do you miss a lot of lessons? *

Mark only one oval.

- yes
- no
- not sure
- occasionally

23. Do you find support in ITS? *

Mark only one oval.

- yes
- no

24. do you feel you need additional support whilst in ITS? *

Mark only one oval.

- yes
- no

5. If ITS provided the following FREE Support, which services would you be comfortable to attend? *

(you may tick as many boxes as you feel apply to your needs)

Check all that apply.

- Revision classes in certain modules
- Individual support
- Counselling sessions
- Family therapy
- Reading and writing sessions
- Grooming programme
- Anger management programme
- a motivation programme
- organising skills programme
- anxiety and stress related programme
- managing your money programme
- time management programme

Appendix 10 a* **Field notes - An Academic Perspective*

Wolfinger (2002) brings to the fore, a distinction between abstract field notes and practical field notes as used in ethnographic research. Wolfinger (*ibid*), implies that the abstract field notes are unwritten observations and assimilations of the researcher during the field work study/public space interactions. Wolfinger (*ibid*) claims that abstract field notes are vital in ethnographic research as their summative description and interpretation - which are also inclusive of researchers' subjective views and beliefs, connect the researcher with the participants being researched.

Gibbs (2012) argues that in order to ensure that the description and interpretation of observations made are not too subjective, researchers require highly developed interpersonal skills which combine both empathy and analytical ability.

Practical field notes on the other hand, include note taking practices. In this regard, Wolfinger (2002) asserts that practical considerations for note taking are often neglected and absent in field note tutorials since in his opinion, the complexity and skill requirements of note taking are often underestimated. This author argues that the biggest challenge for researchers (especially novice ones) in pursuit of field notes practices, is to determine what to observe or annotate. In this regard Wolfinger (*ibid*) relates 3 practical considerations that shape note-taking: the use of preliminary notes (forming an outline during fieldwork and further developed outside fieldwork); the natural focalisation of themes as fieldwork progresses; and the influence of the researcher's perception of potential audiences assisting the field work process.

It is worth mentioning that the value of these considerations do not eliminate the complex task of the researcher to determine exactly what should be annotated (or observed in the abstract field notes for the matter). Wolfinger (2002), claims that the choice of what is to be annotated (or observed in the abstract field notes) rests primarily on researchers' tacit knowledge and beliefs.

Linking the above to this research study and to Wolfinger's (*ibid*) suggestive methods, note taking and abstract observations in this investigation were originally based on the comprehensive strategy method (systematically describe everything that happens during note taking). Elements of salient hierarchy method (the jotting down of emerging intriguing, deviant, or memorable aspects) were also incorporated. (For example the recorded variant size of student recreational facilities [appendices 10b, 10c] – comprehensive/systematic – and the recorded variant of students' and workers attire in both MHV institutions – salient hierarchy).

***Appendices 10 b* Personal observations and reflections about the environment at MCAST**

The Campus was easily accessible at all times. I was never stopped or questioned on entrance. I was pretty much able to circulate around the buildings, the canteen and also the library. Whilst totally welcoming this freedom of movement (a contrast to my exposure at work and hospitality background [where security personnel are seen frequently]), I have also pondered at possible negative implications this complete public accessibility might have on general student/staff and campus safety. Another aspect I noticed in my visits (which was also in contrast to our working [hospitality oriented] environment), was the lack of formality experienced within the campus. In fact, unlike ITS students, students at MCAST wore very casual wear and there appeared to be no emphasis on 'grooming'. Lack of formality in the attire was also generally noted amongst members of staff.

In public areas, mingling of students was predominant, especially within the canteen and at the entrance to the library. However I noticed numerous relaxing areas (some larger than others) for students. The canteen, being the main recreational area, was manned by service providers and evidently represented a 'haven' for the students. The majority of students I observed spending time in this area, appeared relaxed. The extent and repetitiveness of foul language used by students was substantial. Groups of friends would sit down for long periods of time (some not necessarily consuming food or beverage products) and chat, whilst replying to individual phone texts. The most populated area was the billiards area where students would gather to cheer their friends playing. Occasionally, I also encountered one or two students coming in, taking a seat and after a while they would pick up their things and leave. During the times I was there, I did not see any adults use the inside sitting area of the canteen. I have however, seen them use the external sitting area.

During my formal and informal interactions with members of the support team, it was clear to me, that members of staff appeared settled and for the most part, cognisant about their role and its impact on students' lives. I also noted in most staff (not so much in the spoken word but in the gesticulations and alternating voice projections), a genuine interest and collective sense of concern for the welfare of students. Instances of frustration and annoyance at the desire to do more for students, but finding oneself not in a position to do so, due to practical realities faced and limitation of resources were also recorded.

Additionally and more importantly, within these sessions staff spoke about students in a *very* empathic manner, exhibiting, at least to me, a spirit of compassion and understanding towards the students. I have however noted negative feedback made towards some parents (who are perceived as unappreciative of services and efforts rendered) as well as towards some members of the academic staff (who in turn are perceived as self-centred rather than student-centred). This implies that what lecturers say and what they practice (espoused beliefs and practice) are perceived by others (in this case staff), to be different. Nevertheless, on the whole, there appeared to be a genuine desire to work with and for students.

***Appendix 10 c* Personal observations and reflections about the environment at ITS**

Unlike MCAST, ITS Campuses were not easily accessible. For example, the main campus was guarded by a security department located right by the main entrance of the institute which remained operational all 24 hrs. In order to direct flow of traffic (cars and persons on foot) all other entrances were locked down and opened only when required. Persons not working or studying in ITS, were usually asked to sign in and a visitor's badge was normally provided. Only members of the public using the public restaurants were allowed straight in without the need to record personal data.

Another variant from MCAST was the aspect of aesthetic formality practiced within ITS. In ITS, a lot of emphasis was placed on the grooming and attire of the students. In fact, all students were expected to wear (and purchase) a pre-set uniform. Another uniform (again purchased by the students), was used in the practical classes namely the kitchen, service and sports-related classes. The attire of the academic team was predominantly formal (suits) even though I noticed a reduction in formality (in some females) since my return. Less emphasis was placed on the attire (as I noticed that staff were now allowed to wear short and sometimes extremely tight fitting clothing) and overall grooming (especially in males [rough beard for example]) of the support and general administrative staff.

Recreational areas were very limited in ITS especially in the winter period (as in the summer months, students made use of external designated sitting areas). This was primarily due to infrastructural limitations. In fact the main recreational areas at ITS main campus, include the canteen area and the limited atrium sitting area. The canteen (known by all as the 'Palms' area) was considered 'to be the heart of the catering operation at the institute' (ITS Prospectus, 2014/15:107). The Palms was manned by students who cooked and served food as part of their educational programmes (food preparation and production and food service oriented). The Palms area with its minuscule size, was used by students and all the employees of ITS. Staff as a norm, used the very few tables inside the canteen whilst students (and some staff) used the compacted sitting area found within the narrow corridor leading to the canteen and other campus areas.

***Appendix 10 d* Summary of feedback from focus groups carried out with Staff Representatives from both institutions.**

Perceptions of student body and voice

Staff within ITS, claimed that students are viewed as beneficiaries of services rendered. Only one participant claimed that students are viewed as customers. On the other hand, within MCAST 50% of participants claimed that students were viewed as beneficiaries whilst the other 50% claimed they were viewed as customers. No participant in either institution stated that students were viewed as partners.

Within ITS all participants agree that student involvement is important as it brings about different perspectives. However they acknowledged that ‘most times it’s not taken into consideration’, but recognised its importance as it ensures that services can be ‘tailored’ to students’ specific needs... . Within MCAST on the other hand, whilst most participants agree that students’ involvement is important, some respondents were doubtful about the value and reliability of students’ involvement:

Participants in both institutions mentioned that students and their parents, at times, do not show appreciation for the dedication shown in one’s work. Participants argued that whilst some students do show respect and appreciation, others act abusively towards them and use political influence to try and get what they want.

Quality and accessibility of SSS

Within ITS there was some disagreement on the SSS. Whilst most of the participants stated that their unit was working effectively, there were those who argued that their unit was not working as effectively as it should. Participants asserted that things would improve with the right restructuring of the same student support services.

Within MCAST on the other hand, participants claimed that their unit was working effectively. Only one participant stated that the unit was not working as effectively as it should due to the unit being ‘under-resourced’.

About the perceived accessibility of services, participants within ITS stated that the services are easily accessible to all students. In the same vein, within MCAST whilst most participants argued that their unit was easily accessible to all students, some claimed the opposite for different reasons. These reasons included the fact that the provision of SSS had a limited presence in some satellite campuses, that students were not directed towards the services by the Institutes or lecturers who are working within them and that appropriate therapy rooms were lacking especially in satellite institutes.

Challenges to students

The element of significant stress on students was raised. Perceived to be on the increase are: drug issues, suicide issues, exposure to abusive relationships at home and at work. resilient students cope somehow, but non-resilient students ‘break down’. The latter require further training and support.

There was a recognition that it was not an easy time for students - 'handheld and shielded [in secondary education] and suddenly [they] have to stand on their own feet... this transition sets students back. Students are found to require further training in time management and self organisation.

Suggestions offered

Students are found to have significant social and financial problems which can be ameliorated by the same institutions.

1. There was a perceived need to support them, to meet them regularly and to supervise them and 'that is where we are getting stuck'. Participants explained that 'sometimes there is no follow up. somewhere the process stops usually because of new cases. ... need more manpower'
2. Greater sensitivity was felt to be required when dealing with student matters. Not everybody is suited for a supporting role and should not be forced on by the institution as it can have a negative outcome on students' retention. For example, lecturers are expected to do pastoral care of students but they may not be particularly inclined. Therefore, friction is felt when a 'blunt' interaction with a student is learnt about. For example, a student leaving the course - this student did not go to SSS but spoke to a lecturer who advised the student to 'leave, as it is not worth it here.'

Participants voiced their concern about the evident surface learning of students. An example given was that students' cv writing is poor, yet students seem to pass the module. Participants argued that this made no sense and called for more collaboration between lecturers and support services to address such issues.

The issue of limited human resources emerged in both institutions. Participants claimed that the work increased but the staff allocation did not grow proportionately. Other resources (such as materials in general, therapy rooms and software developments) were also found to be required.

Participants mentioned that support in 'key skills' and general funding was good but not enough to address significant challenges faced by a minority of students. Refugees were identified as one of the minority groups which undoubtedly required additional support. It was suggested that in such cases assistance from national supporting systems should be sought to complement internal limited resources.

Better Communication amongst different units as well as with students was solicited. Participants suggested that educational institutions utilise the same mediums of communication mostly used by students themselves.

Staff development: up-skilling of staff members was recommended.

Reach-out programmes were felt to be critical - 'become familiar with the students so when it is needed they would have already seen our face and can speak to us in time of panic'.

**Appendix 11 a Overall Students' Satisfaction Rates for SSS provided
in both MHV Institutions**

Overall are you satisfied with the SSS provided?		
	MCAST 2015 %	ITS 2015 %
Extremely Satisfied	2	0.6
Satisfied	38.4	38.8
Dissatisfied	20.2	25.5
Extremely Dissatisfied	14.1	13.3
Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	25.3	21.8

**Appendix 11 b (1) Students' Satisfaction Rates for SSS provided in
ITS**

ITS 2015 - Please rate each of the following services provided

	Excellent %	Good %	Average %	Poor %	Very Poor %	I never used this Service %
Career Guidance	6.1	27.3	13.3	1.2	2.4	49.7
Counselling	7.3	17.6	9.7	3	1.8	60.6
Chaplaincy	3	12.7	12.7	1.2	1.8	68.5
Registrar	3	18.2	26.1	25.5	27.3	0
Internship	23	35.8	23	8.5	5.5	4.2
Student Liaison officer	2.4	22.4	16.4	3	1.8	53.9

Appendix 11 b (ii) Students' Satisfaction Rates for SSS provided in MCAST

MCAST 2015 - Please rate each of the following services provided

	Excellent %	Good %	Average %	Poor %	Very Poor %	I never used this Service %
Career Guidance	9.1	20.2	12.1	5.1	3	50.5
Chaplaincy	6	18	9	0	3	64
Counselling	8.1	11.1	11.1	1	5.1	63.6
Group Activities	5.1	13.1	14.1	8.1	3	56.6
Inclusive Education Unit	4	10.1	15.2	5.1	4	61.6
Learning Support Unit	3	13.1	10.1	9.1	2	62.6
L1 - L2 Courses Moderator	0	10.1	14.1	1	1	73.7
Magic Wonders Childcare Centre	1	9.1	6.1	0	0	83.8
The Helping Skills Course and the Student-to-Student Network	1	11.1	11.1	3	4	69.7
The Main Building Foyer Information Centre	3	22.2	26.3	5.1	2	41.4
Institute SS Co-ordinators	3	15.2	22.2	6.1	4	49.5

Appendix 12

Challenges of Students attending MHVE

	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Neither Agree nor Disagree %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
Financial Challenges - MCAST Responses	29.3	26.3	22.2	15.2	7.1
Financial Challenges - ITS Responses	17.6	33.9	26.7	12.7	9.1
Academic Challenges - MCAST Responses	27	44	18	5	6
Academic Challenges - ITS Responses	13.9	44.8	20.6	15.8	4.8
Social Challenges - MCAST Responses	14.1	27.3	25.3	22.2	11.1
Social Challenges - ITS Responses	9.7	28.5	25.5	23	13.3
Personal Challenges - MCAST Responses	12.1	27.3	29.3	20.2	11.1
Personal Challenges - ITS Responses	4.8	22.4	32.1	27.3	13.3
Work Related Challenges - MCAST Responses	21.2	36.4	22.2	17.2	3
Work Related Challenges - ITS Responses	24.2	28.5	23	17.6	6.7

Average Student Responses from both Institutions (ITS and MCAST) 2015

	% (*)
Anxiety and Stress	74
Poor Concentration	61
Panic Attacks	34
Irritability	53
Loneliness	40
Mood Swings	61
Tearfulness	39
Depression	33
Low Self Esteem	53
Poor Body Image	38
Loss of Motivation	57
Appetite Loss/Increase	55
Insomnia	41
tiredness	73
Bullying/Abuse	13
Can't stop thinking of food	36
Smoking	31
Drinking Issues	22
Use of un-prescribed Drugs	6
Violent behaviour	8
Issues with Police/Courts	4
Living with Foster/guardians/residential homes	4
Diagnosed with Learning Diff	14
Difficulty with Reading	11
Difficulty in writing/sentence Structure	19
Difficulty in organising tasks and Self	29

() With reference to appendix 8 section 23. The results for 'Applies to me presently' have been added to the results for 'Has applied to me in the past and currently still applies' and divided by the two institutions.*

	MCAST 2015		ITS 2015	
	percentage of current scenario pertaining each ailment %	Has applied to me in the past (anything before 12 months ago) %	percentage of current scenario pertaining each ailment %	Has applied to me in the past (anything before 12 months ago) %
<u><i>Anxiety Issues</i></u>				
Anxiety and Stress	82.8	8.1	64.8	10.9
Poor Concentration	66.7	15.2	55.8	17.6
Panic Attacks	44.5	13.1	23	9.1
Irritability	60.6	13.1	46	12.1
Insomnia	47.5	9.1	33.9	10.9
<u><i>Depressive Related Issues</i></u>				
Tiredness	76.7	10.1	69.1	7.9
Loneliness	43.4	20.2	37	15.2
Mood Swings	64.7	11.1	56.4	12.1
Tearfulness	50.5	9.1	27.9	13.9

	percentage of current scenario pertaining each ailment %	Has applied to me in the past (anything before 12 months ago) %	percentage of current scenario pertaining each ailment %	Has applied to me in the past (anything before 12 months ago) %
Depression	38.4	16.2	27.8	12.7
Low Self Esteem	53.6	17.2	52.2	17
Loss of Motivation	61.6	18.2	52.8	17.6
<u>Food Issues</u>				
Appetite Loss/Increase	58.6	12.1	52.1	12.7
Can't stop thinking of food	33.4	10.1	38.8	8.5
Poor Body Image	42.4	18.2	33.3	18.8
<u>Addictions</u>				
Smoking	23.2	13.1	38.2	3
Drinking Issues	4.2	13.1	24.2	6.7
Use of un-prescribed Drugs	4	6.1	8.5	4.8
Appetite Loss/Increase	58.6	12.1	52.1	12.7
Can't stop thinking of food	33.4	10.1	38.8	8.5

	percentage of current scenario pertaining each ailment %	Has applied to me in the past (anything before 12 months ago) %	percentage of current scenario pertaining each ailment %	Has applied to me in the past (anything before 12 months ago) %
<u>Anger Issues</u>				
Violent behaviour	6	7.1	9.6	6.1
Irritability	60.6	13.1	46	12.1
Bullying/Abuse	9.1	19.2	16.4	19.4
<u>Social Issues</u>				
Issues with Police/Courts	3	4	4.2	3
Living with Foster/guardians/residential homes	3	4	5.4	2.4
Bullying/Abuse	9.1	19.2	16.4	19.4
<u>Academic Issues</u>				
Poor Concentration	66.7	15.2	55.8	17.6
Diagnosed with Learning Diff	9.1	6.1	18.8	1.2
Difficulty with Reading	3	7.1	18.1	6.1
Difficulty in writing/sentence Structure	13.2	7.1	24.9	3
Difficulty in organising tasks and Self	33.3	9.1	24.9	7.9