

Briefing note: Student engagement in school life and learning

This research project has been carried out in light of Malta's commitment to reach the European Union's targets within the EU 2020 strategy, namely to increase the percentage of 30-34 year olds having successfully completed higher education to 40% and decrease early school leaving among 18-24 year olds to 10%. Malta has invested heavily in its education and training system but despite significant progress, the early school leaving rate remains among the highest in the European Union.

In order to better understand and analyse the situation, the National Commission for Further and Higher Education embarked on a study reflecting student engagement and participation in their learning and school life.

By collecting data through an online survey and in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this study integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain the views of administrators, teachers and former students of public and private Sixth Forms, covering the majority of student enrolment in further education in Malta.

Several main themes have originated from the views expressed by the three groups of respondents. Comparing and analysing these recurrent topics have led to a number of recommendations included in the report.

Key points

- The purpose of education as identified by the three groups of participants
- Understanding and defining student engagement
- Forms of student engagement
- Benefits of students' engagement
- Roles and characteristics of good teachers
- Reasons behind engagement and disengagement

The purpose of education as identified by the three groups of participants

The purpose of education as identified by the three groups of participants in this study is to equip students with a set of skills and competences to prepare them for their future lives in the workplace or in further education.

Understanding and defining student engagement

Teachers, students and administrators understand and define student engagement as the behaviours exhibited by students such as compliance, willingness and motivation to participate in the learning process. Both the cognitive and the emotional perspective were taken into consideration in defining student engagement.

Forms of student engagement

The forms of student engagement include the learners' active participation in the classroom, in extracurricular activities, and in non-academic programs. The academic aspect however was believed to be of primary importance.

Benefits of students' engagement

Students' engagement has several benefits as it makes learning a more enjoyable experience, fosters student commitment, increases retention and positively impacts learners' futures as active citizens.

Roles and characteristics of good teachers

Students discussed the roles and characteristics of good teachers whereby a set of personality traits, teaching methods and class management styles are identified. In brief, good teachers were portrayed as confident and passionate experts who set high expectations by challenging, reinforcing, and encouraging their students.

Reasons behind engagement and disengagement

The study also focuses on identifying the reasons behind engagement and disengagement.

First, the school environment, in terms of positive attitude, physical resources, timetables and breaks, and pedagogical practices, were found to affect student engagement.

Second, students' socio-emotional well-being was found to play a major role as well. This included their feeling of belonging to their institution through the bonds built with peers and superiors. A number of other student dependent factors were also identified. Students were more engaged when they were encouraged to take charge of their learning, rather than being 'spoon-fed' and when they were encouraged to voice their opinion.

It also results that students' family background, including their economic and social standing, can also deeply affect the learning experience. Students' interest in their subject choices was identified as an important factor as well, especially when parental pressure and lack of information frequently leads students into wrong subject choices.

Findings also show that the teaching and learning process and assessment methods can detrimentally affect student engagement. Respondents encouraged the adoption of alternative modes of teaching and assessment to take into account individual idiosyncrasies and allow students with different capabilities to reveal their full potential.

An engaging learning process pushes students past mere memorization and makes them aware of the rationale and applicability of what they are learning. A rigid and heavy syllabus was mentioned at several instances as a major obstacle for student engagement. A healthy balance of academia and extracurricular engagement was equally identified as key to a successful Sixth Form experience due to the numerous benefits of extracurricular activities to students.

Conclusion & recommendations

An educational system that responds to students' needs can empower students and ultimately lead to engaged learners.

Training students to become independent and responsible lifelong learners starts from early school years through a student centred approach and active learning.

Students become more committed to their learning when they are convinced of the relevance of their studies to their real life and to their long term plans.

Involving teachers in designing the syllabi and in developing school policies enhances the teaching and learning processes and makes the latter more responsive to the needs of all those involved.

Continuous professional development supports teachers in incorporating student engagement in their teaching styles.

Adequate career guidance plays a major role in raising awareness among students as to the different paths available after secondary schooling and can assist them in making correct subject choices.

Delaying any important career decision or definite subject choices to a later stage in a students' schooling can help decrease stress on the learners and give them more flexibility for self-discovery.

When administrators and teachers adopt open-door policies, they become physically and emotionally more accessible for students, hence improving the students' general well-being at school.

Teachers persistently highlight the demanding rigid syllabus and time limitations as the main reasons that prevent them from developing engaging lessons. A revised curriculum reduces stress on both teacher and learner and gives teachers more flexibility to personalize their teaching and engage their students.

Alternative forms of assessment that are not exclusively dependent on summative and high-stakes examinations, as well as introducing credit system programmes in Sixth Forms can create further possibilities for students to personalize their learning experience.

Structure of the report

Chapter 1 – Rationale behind the research conducted & methodology applied in obtaining and presenting the data in this report.

Chapter 2 – Literature review. This chapter aims to provide a theoretical background to various aspects of student engagement in this report.

Chapter 3 – Presentation of the findings from the quantitative data collected in the online survey of former students, teachers and administrative staff.

Chapter 4 – Overview on the concept of student engagement as perceived by former students, teachers and administrators, including the definitions of student engagement, its forms, importance, and signs as perceived by the three groups of people interviewed.

Chapter 5 – Presentation and comparative analyses of the roles and responsibilities regarding facilitating student engagement held by former students, teachers and administrators.

Chapter 6 – The conditions contributing to student engagement from the perspective of former students, teachers and administrators.

Chapter 7 – The conditions hindering student engagement from the perspective of the three target groups.

Chapter 8 – The relationship between student engagement and continuation of studies from the perspective of former students, teachers and administrators.

Chapter 9 – A comprehensive discussion of the key findings of each chapter along with comparisons between views expressed by students, teachers and administrative staff.

Chapter 10 – A comprehensive analysis of the concept of engagement as seen through the eyes of students, teachers and administrators. The final chapter is devoted to a discussion on the extent to which the generated topics from the survey and interviews can offer possibilities for engagement in the Maltese educational context.