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Malta's Futures for Higher and Further Education

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Type: **Strategic Futures** – a futures exercise undertaken to improve strategic and organisational development capacities in higher and further education in Malta. A pilot application of the INTERREG IIC West FUTURREG – Futures for Regional Development Project (2005-2007), www.futurreg.net.
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Purpose

The main aim of this initiative was to promote more long-term futures and evidence-based approaches to governance, strategies, and policy development in the higher and further education in Malta under the aegis of the INTERREG IIC FUTURREG Project. The FUTURREG Project (2005 – 2007) was designed to ensure that regional policies and regional development organisations were informed by high-quality futures tools and participatory processes with significant long-term impacts. This particular FUTURREG sub-project/exercise focused on an urgent need to build up the strategic and organizational capacities of institutions in the higher and further education sector and to support them in using futures approaches and foresight tools in developing their strategies in Malta. The results of this work are being used by the Maltese National Commission for Higher Education to define a framework for future-oriented higher and further education strategies using futures approaches.

Reform of the Higher and Further Education Sector

The Higher and Further Education sector in Malta has in recent years been the focus of attention on the part of Government in Malta as part of a concerted effort to gear up the country for the knowledge-based society and the innovation-driven economy. This approach reflects Government's awareness of the importance of sound investments in higher education, research and lifelong human resources development as the drivers for sustaining wealth generation, competitiveness and quality of life.

There was also recognition that progress in this sector could only be achieved through institution-building and capacity-building

efforts aimed at bringing about much-needed sector-wide reforms. These reforms are not unique to higher education since they go hand in hand with similar change processes underway in research and innovation.

In 2006, the Government set up the permanent National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE) in an effort to spearhead the reform process, especially to make recommendations regarding the required changes in the Education Act. The NCHE after consultations with all stakeholders has identified the following issues:

1. vision and strategic oversight,
2. expansion of higher education to meet future requirements,
3. funding and accountability,
4. quality assurance and accreditation, and
5. student choice and fair access.



In this context, the NCHE identified a clear need to strengthen the strategic capacities of key organisations within the higher and further education sector to ensure an effective input on their part both to the national strategic plan for the sector and in developing their own long-term strategies. The NCHE was quick to recognise the importance and value of futures ap-

proaches in addressing this concern and in ensuring the development of a more coherent and robust national strategy. This led to the development of a strong collaboration in 2007 between NCHE and the Malta Council for Science and Technology (MCST) through the Interreg 3C Futurreg project to introduce the use of futures approaches in the sector.

Encouraging Students and Creating a Shared Vision

In July 2007, the NCHE through support provided through the MCST Futurreg project embarked on an exercise aimed at promoting more long-term futures and evidence-based approaches to policy and governance in the higher education sector in Malta.

The main objectives of the exercise were:

- to promote more long-term futures and evidence-based approaches to governance, strategies, and policy development in the higher and further education in Malta;
- to support institutions in the higher and further education sector in using futures approaches and foresight tools in developing their strategies;
- to encourage students to play a more proactive role in the higher and further education strategy process through enhanced awareness and use of futures approaches;

- to create a shared understanding of emerging trends and drivers of science-society and science popularisation futures;
- to share inter-regional experiences on futures methods and approaches for tackling future and emerging science-society challenges, namely gender, privatisation, and life-long learning;
- to define a framework for future-oriented higher and further education and science popularisation strategies using futures approaches.

To kick-start this initiative, a training event for the development of futures skills in policy was organized at the end of July for key stakeholders in the higher education sector. Those responsible for strategic policy development within higher and further education organisations were particularly targeted as it was expected that this training would benefit the development of the organisations' long-term strategic plans. As a result of the feedback from this event, three key groups of stakeholders were identified for follow-up action, namely educational institutions in Gozo (the sister island), the vocational college (Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology) and student bodies.

Adapting Futures Approaches to the Higher Education Sector

The futures approaches used in this exercise were adapted to the needs and understandings of the different stakeholder groups. Three one-day futures workshops were organised for each stakeholder group: Gozo, MCAST and students. All three workshops adopted a broadly similar approach of creating a shared awareness and understanding of emerging trends and drivers of change and their implications for the sector. The Gozo and MCAST workshops followed scenario-building approaches and produced superlative sentences describing the organisation's achievements by 2028. The student workshop focused on the development of a mini-vision for the higher education sector. The following stepped approach was used in the three workshops organised:

Warm-up: time-line for Gozo & GPSS 1977-2007 Goal: to heighten awareness of past change and past watersheds/ transformations

Reversing the negative	Goal: to move from worries to transformative goals.
Emerging issues of change	Goal: to heighten awareness of on-coming change.
Briefing on emerging issues	Goal: to increase awareness of emerging changes and implications.
Stakeholder/potential partner identification	Goal: to identify network of support for positive change.
Sentence completion	Goal: to define concrete goals for transformative change.
Strategy working groups	Goal: to draft initial strategies for positive change.
Reviewing strategies	Goal: to share brainstormed strategies, add more concrete details, understand how the strategies might work in concert.
Creating change	Goals: to add more concrete details, resources, and allies to each strategy; to create a list of possible next steps; to commit to creating change.
Debrief, next steps, close	Goals: to identify biggest opportunities within grasp, hazards to avoid and desired next steps.

Visions of Superlatives in Higher Education

The main findings of each workshop are presented below and these take the form of success scenarios or visions for the organisation and sector.

Giovanni Curmi Higher Secondary School Gozo – Strategic Foresight Workshop

Exercise: 'Superlatives' Sentence Completion

In 2028, GOZO POST-SECONDARY is a futuristic school because all the staff are intrinsically motivated and work together to provide a service of excellence and a climate of collegiality. Because of this, students are happy to be part of this Centre. In 2028, GOZO POST-SECONDARY is historic among all other schools, because

- we will be considered the major educational institution as regards proactive change in Malta, and
- it will be a state-of-the-art institution.

In 2028, the school was the first school to introduce entrepreneurship and collaborate with private entities offering employment and training using EU funds. The school is truly great among all other schools, because

- it is a school that caters for various disciplines, and
- it has a great past from which it has learned to project itself into the future.

In 2028, GOZO POST-SECONDARY is a leader among all other schools, because

- all its teachers are themselves convinced learners,
- all its teachers are themselves catalysts of change, and
- it will be the key institution leading to further education and life-long education.

MCAST – Strategic Foresight Workshop

Exercise: 'Superlatives' Sentence Completion

In 2028, MCAST produced a breakthrough when it inaugurated its state-of-the-art campus catering for new frontier areas of vocational expertise. In 2028, MCAST is a futuristic school, because

- it has several institutes abroad and an international student profile.

MCAST is historic among all other schools, because

- it will self-fund all its educational programs and related resources, and
- it was the first school to offer a chance to students who were drop outs at secondary education and to offer courses that were totally new to Malta.

MCAST is famous among all other schools because it will be leading in creating career opportunities rather than satisfying existing and emerging industry requirements. In 2028, MCAST was the first school to

- utilise nuclear energy to generate its own technological systems – and in a next step, send a student to Mars!
- And it was the first school to perform the retraining of all of the workforce.

MCAST is special among all other schools because it is the foremost, leading VET College in all Europe due to its responsiveness to many educational, social, and cultural changes, all of which make it a place which students – youngsters and adults – cannot do without. People who in 2028 visit MCAST say, “WOW!” because

- MCAST graduates are reaching excellence while keeping the social intelligence aspect as the core of the curriculum, and
- it is providing to thousands of students the best standards of education and courses relevant to economic needs in a state-of-the-art campus

In 2028, MCAST is truly great among all other schools because it endeavours to cater for the needs of industry and the economy.

Student Councils and Organizations – Strategic Foresight Workshop

The mini-vision developed by students identified the following significant changes required in the higher education sector in Malta.

Introduce more hands-on learning

- In 6th forms and universities, students should be given more time to experience new things, such as hands-on experience, rather than studying and lectures only, because it is the practice and experience that count. More hands-on experience both for self-development, quality, and employability.
- Change the syllabus by decreasing syllabus content and an increasing voluntary and practical work of what one is studying.
- Bridge the gap between the school bench and future work through a revision of curriculum and on-site/ specific training.
- Teach entrepreneurship in University courses, e.g.: Pharmacy, Law, BA, etc.
- Conduct integrated work placements during university courses.

Introduce alternative education

- Change the curriculum to include necessary skills that are conducive to character formation and development – so that students will not [merely] accept jobs but CREATE them.

- Conceive new courses for holistic education to learn skills such as reporting, analysing, and other soft skills
- Promote development and sustainability of VALUES in society for the grassroots of tomorrow's society.
- Enhance social conscience for developing the student as a fulfilled being/ person
- Not only academic subjects are important. Post-secondary schools for arts such as dancing, singing, acting, etc. should be opened. Courses to prepare for change and advancements, for example cybernetics, and to spread awareness for a better future – including performing arts.
- Offer additional extracurricular courses (not compulsory) to provide general knowledge, better preparation for future jobs, and to make important lifetime decisions. (If already available, improving awareness of such courses should be considered.)

Communication platforms

- Improve use and availability of Internet and e-learning in the curriculum.
- Students should have a platform for commenting without the fear of being penalised.

Revision and updating of curricula

- Revise curriculum in recognition of informal education. Change the syllabus to an up-to-date one, removing invalid information from the syllabus to be studied, giving students more time to focus on important topics, e.g., physics or geography.
- The systems of knowledge course needs to be revised. It should be modular, with students choosing areas they want to study. Systems of knowledge should NOT be a compulsory subject; this is NOT a requirement for entry in university.
- Consider career and work possibilities that can be offered after post-secondary/ university courses. Course options are often too stylised.
- Develop a flexible and competence-based curriculum design.

Improving quality assurance

- Quality assurance and recognition structures that involve teachers, employers, students, and social partners should be improved. Strengthen national quality assurance agencies through increased funding and legal authority.
- Allow stakeholders an opportunity to form or revise and voice openly their opinions.

Improving Higher Education by Involving the Stakeholders

The main conclusions to be drawn from the exercise is that in a fast-evolving sector of higher and further education, representing a range of diverse interests and needs, it is the stakeholders who are best placed to advise on and support the development of long-term strategies. The insights and lessons learnt from these workshops highlight the fact that foresight exercises are vital tools to support the strategy development process by

- allowing stakeholders an opportunity to form or revise and voice openly their opinions;
- jointly reviewing current pathways emerging from past decisions and actions and ways of escaping future lock-ins;
- prioritising key challenges and next steps for joint action.

Sources and References

- National Commission for Higher Education <http://www.nchemalta.org/>
- FUTURREG Project: <http://www.futurreg.net>

- Kick-off Futurreg HE event (July 2007): <http://www.mcst.org.mt/news.aspx?nid=38>
- Luke Georghiou and Jennifer Cassingena Harper <http://forera.jrc.es/documents/papers/anchor/HigherEdAnchorPaper.pdf>

About the EFMN: Policy Professionals dealing with RTD, Innovation and Economic Development increasingly recognize a need to base decisions on broadly based participative processes of deliberation and consultation with stakeholders. One of the most important tools they apply is FORESIGHT. The EFMN or European Foresight Monitoring Network supports policy professionals by monitoring and analyzing Foresight activities in the European Union, its neighbours and the world. The EFMN helps those involved in policy development to stay up to date on current practice in Foresight. It helps them to tap into a network of know-how and experience on issues related to the day to day design, management and execution of Foresight and Foresight related processes.