Prepared for the ‘good life’?
Higher Education ‘Applied Sciences’ students in a vocational college.

Ralph Cassar
BSc, MSc (Science) (Open), MBA

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Education (EdD)

School of Education
College of Social Sciences
University of Glasgow

May, 2020

Abstract

Policies on education, particularly those about post-compulsory education, namely Further Education and Higher Education, emphasise education as preparation for work, or rather for the preparation of workers necessary for the labour market and for economic growth. This study delves into what students value about education and in life. It explores the perspectives of undergraduate students at a technical and vocational college, their experiences at school and college, and their aspirations for the future, work and the 'good life'. The students taking part in this study were reading for Bachelor's degrees in Chemical Technology, Health Science and Environmental Engineering at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). The students talk about their experience in compulsory education, about their choice of subjects at school, and their favourite teachers. They explain their choices and trajectories on completing secondary education and why they were reading for a degree at a vocational college. They also speak about the influences on their choices, such as family, peers and institutional structures.

The capabilities approach is used as a framework to interpret the interview and focus group data. The capabilities approach evaluates the real opportunities, freedoms or capabilities of individuals to lead the lives they value and to make valued choices. The students in this study valued capabilities for respect, dignity and recognition, that is being recognised and respected as individuals with different needs and preferences; for a learning disposition, that is being supported and having fun while learning; for social relations, social networks and affiliation, that is feeling welcomed and part of a community at school and college; for knowledge and imagination, that is getting the knowledge they feel is important for their future and to a lesser extent for participating in society; for practical reason, that is being given access to information about various opportunities and options in life; and for valued work, in other words, work which respects the boundaries between work and other aspects of life, and autonomy at work. Conversion factors enabling or constraining the development of capabilities included the attitudes of parents towards education; experiences at school with teachers and lecturers; the influence of their peers and siblings; the structure of the education system and of educational institutions; and their work experience. Students' perception of the 'good life' is having the autonomy and resources to pursue valued 'beings and doings'. Students see education as enabling the 'good life' by giving them the opportunity to access interesting work, which, however, does not impinge on other spheres of life.

Contents

Acknowledgement

I am an accidental teacher. I used to avoid the word ‘teacher’. Indeed, my job title at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) is that of Senior Lecturer. My journey in reading for the Doctorate of Education, however, opened my eyes to the importance of students and lecturers learning from and teaching each other. My gratitude goes to my EdD colleagues and friends, who embarked on this journey together with me, and to all the inspiring staff who supported me along the way.

I would like to thank, in particular, Dr Muir Houston. His timely comments and pointers helped me polish my text and explore avenues I had not thought of. I am also indebted to the young adults who participated in this study. Their voice, their aspirations, their effort to learn and achieve, and their hopes for a ‘good life’, are a source of inspiration.

Thanks also go to MCAST’s former Principal, Mr Stephen Cachia, and to the Deputy Principal, Dr Alex Rizzo, for their support. The tuition fees were sponsored in part by MCAST, through the college’s Continuous Professional Development Fund.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues, close friends and family for their words of encouragement: Iggy Fenech for his help and patience with editing, and my mother and father, Vivien and Alfred Cassar, for all their help and support.

Author's declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Ralph Cassar

Chapter One – Introduction

A cursory look at policy documents on Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) in Malta (MCAST, 2015; NCFHE, 2015) reveals a dominant discourse promoting the development of human capital. The needs of the economy are presented as the reason why students should pursue FE and HE. Curricula are said to be modernised 'to reflect present and future needs of industry' (MCAST, 2015, p.15). The HE system needs to deliver 'the knowledge, skills and competences required in the labour market' (NCFHE, 2015, p.27). Students have to fit in and adapt to the demands of the market; there is no mention of an economy which caters for the needs of people, and what students want and need. Professional and personal development is framed in the context of preparing students to contribute to economic growth. This dominant discourse emphasises the development of human capital, the utility of FE and HE to the individual and the supposed direct link between FE and vocational HE and economic growth (European Commission, 2002; European Commission, 2010a; MCAST, 2015). The major concern in education and, perhaps, more so in post-compulsory vocational educational and training (VET) offered by FE and HE colleges, is seemingly what employers want rather than what students want for themselves, or what teachers or lecturers think is educationally desirable. Deprez and Wood (2013, p.145) contend that universities run the risk of attempting to produce graduates who may know how to 'do' what the workplace needs but who do not know how to 'think' in order to live a meaningful life. Limiting education to preparation for employment limits students' flourishing and may ignore what students value. The discourse of policy and of society may also mean that students, throughout their educational trajectory, learn to want what is socially constructed as desirable, rather than what they have reason to value.

I teach both FE and HE students at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). I am interested in learning what students perceive to be getting out of learning, and whether the discourse emphasising human capital affects students' views on education and their learning. Instead of studying what policy documents emphasise, I decided to study what students value. MCAST is a post-compulsory institution, offering courses from the basic up to Bachelor's and, recently, Master's level courses. As an institution it is constantly compared, even by students themselves, to the long-established University of Malta. Post-compulsory choices in Malta are limited. The choices are either to enter the world of work, to study at a sixth-form college with a view to gain the entry requirements

to access the University of Malta, or else to choose the vocational route, mainly at the state vocational college, MCAST. These two institutions are the major state institutions for Higher Education (HE) in Malta. The difference between them is that MCAST also offers FE vocational and technical qualifications. The sixth-form route to the University of Malta is, from my experience, more prestigious and the preferred route of students, parents and society at large. Being for a long time, the only route to HE and its more onerous entry requirements (Grubb and Lazerson, 2007, pp.81-82) make the University of Malta, and the sixth-form colleges offering only the courses required for entry to it, more prestigious than MCAST in the eyes of students. Mayo (2017, p.301) attributes the University of Malta's prestige to the fact that historically, the only university in the country catered only for the elite and for prestigious professions. MCAST only began offering its own route to degrees in 2009, and probably was previously seen as a dead-end route of study by students aspiring to read for a degree. Maltese sixth-form students in a 2017 survey said that although they thought they would prefer what they perceived as a more hands-on approach to learning at MCAST, rather than the teaching to the test at sixth-form, they still chose the so-called academic route because they worried that following the vocational route at MCAST would affect their prospects because of a lack of prestige of MCAST qualifications (MfEE, 2017, p.115). The prestige of the academic route to HE is suggested by data which shows that 80.8% of students in HE in 2013 accessed HE via the academic route through academic sixth-form colleges (NCHFE, 2014).

This study is about HE students, whose educational trajectories of reading for degrees at MCAST, may be somewhat different to those valued most by society and sometimes by the students themselves. Some students chose the vocational route directly after compulsory schooling, some tried sixth-form but changed their minds or failed to gain the entry requirements for the University of Malta, and others still underachieved in compulsory schooling and chose to work their way up from basic FE courses at MCAST to eventually read for a degree at MCAST itself, rather than entering the labour market right after secondary school. It should be noted that the minimum entry requirements for access to degree courses at MCAST are different and less demanding than those to enter similar courses at the other major institution offering HE courses, the University of Malta. Some students may also have chosen MCAST because of small classes and the perceived additional support given to students when compared to the traditional university. Vocational colleges or dual-sector universities in the English-speaking world tend to have a more teaching-led culture and are often perceived as lower in status than traditional

universities (Wheelahan, 2009, p.32).

While the socioeconomic background of students may be a factor in their educational trajectories and choices, MCAST does not collect data on students' backgrounds. Although I performed extensive searches in online databases and used search engines for research on the socioeconomic status of students in Malta, no published data and studies about the socioeconomic backgrounds of students in post-compulsory institutions and specifically of students reading for degrees at MCAST and the University of Malta were found, other than a study published in 2014 by the National Commission for Further and Higher Education, *The Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life - National Data for Malta*, also known as the Eurostudent V survey (NCFHE, 2014). An indication of the social background of students at MCAST is the suggestion in this report that the increase from 75% of students in HE in Malta who had fathers with low-skilled jobs in 2010, to 94% in 2013, a 19% increase, may be attributed to the fact that for the first time, the survey included students who were enrolled in HE 'vocationally oriented programmes' (NCHFE, 2014, p.110). The only main state provider of HE 'vocationally oriented programmes' is MCAST.

Conceptual framework

The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of non-traditional HE students of their trajectory through education and their plans for the future. By non-traditional, I mean students who, for various reasons, did not pursue HE at the University of Malta, but at MCAST, the arguably less prestigious, vocational institution.

I am interested in getting to know students at the institution at which I teach better. Getting to know their perceptions of the 'good life' may help me improve my professional practice, my pedagogical approach, and help me make better and more informed contributions during course reviews and internal discussions with management and peers about students, education and pedagogy. In this study I define the 'good life', using Sen's capabilities approach (Sen, 2001), as the valued 'beings and doings' of students, which effective freedoms or opportunities students value, and what they think helps or constrains the achievement wellbeing.

My study will draw mainly on the capabilities approach as an alternative framework to human capital theory. Although Sen (2001), the originator of the approach, uses the singular, 'capability approach', I will use the plural form since I will draw from various sources, especially those applying the capabilities approach to education. I will delve into student conceptions of the 'good life' and what they have 'good reason to value' (*ibid.*, pp.74-75). The capabilities approach offers a framework to examine the real opportunities offered by education to individuals. I am interested in getting to know what students value, mostly in education, but also their outlook on what makes a 'good life'. As a lecturer, a doctoral researcher and a person with my own views on society and what the 'good life' should be, I cannot not compare what the students chose to share with me, with my conception and vision of what education and HE in a vocational college should offer. After all, as Shaull (2000, p.34) declares in the preface to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000) 'there is no such thing as a neutral educational process'. I will use the capabilities approach to discuss the freedoms students perceive as valuable, that is the capabilities they value. In such an approach. student voice is central. Their perceptions of what constitutes a 'good life' for them and how they think education helps them achieve it are explored. The 'good life' spans across students' whole life experiences and so I will explore their experience of education in compulsory education, followed by their experience at college, and their aspirations for the future.

While the capabilities approach was developed first by Amartya Sen, another main contributor to the development of the approach is Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2011). The approach is used to evaluate or design policies towards achieving a good quality of life for individuals in a society and providing the environment in which individuals are able to develop and flourish their potential and choose the kind of life they value. The approach is based on the two central concepts of 'functionings' and 'capabilities'. Functionings are states of 'being and doing', from the very essential condition of being well-nourished and having shelter to other functionings, such as being educated. Capabilities, meanwhile, are sets of valuable functionings that a person has effective access to. A person's capabilities represent the effective freedom or autonomy of an individual to choose between different functioning combinations that the person has reason to value (IEP, nd). Sen (2001, pp. 17-18) describes freedom as involving both the processes that allow the freedom of action and of making decisions, as well as the opportunities available. His vision of successful societies is those in which their members are able to participate effectively and influence the spheres affecting their lives – socially, economically and politically. Freedom is

defined as the expansion of the 'abilities to achieve' or of the capabilities of people to lead the kind of life they value and have reason to value. Capabilities can be enhanced by public policy, and, in turn are influenced by effective use of participatory capabilities (*ibid.*, p. 18). These abilities to achieve are translated into actual 'beings and doings' or functionings. Sen focuses on capabilities, because people are different and the conversion of resources to capabilities varies from person to person. A just society would therefore give its citizens real opportunities to achieve what they value and have reason to value. Sen emphasises the participatory and deliberative aspect of coming to an agreement on what capabilities should be valued in a society and the different 'reasons to value' of each and every individual. Sen (2001) draws our attention to the social, political and economic milieu in which people live their lives. He argues that those who are disadvantaged tend to accept their lot and lower their aspirations and expectations to what they consider reachable. He lists five 'instrumental freedoms' which are essential to live the life one has reason to value, namely political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and a social safety net. In recognising that this list is not exhaustive (*ibid.*, p. 38), Sen's insistence on real opportunities in the context in which individuals live is a recurring theme.

In *The Idea of Justice*, Sen (2010) reiterates that 'adaptation of expectations and perceptions tend to play a particularly major part in the perpetuation of social inequalities' (*ibid.*, p. 288). The difference from the neoliberal stance of 'each to his own' is clear – social support expands people's freedoms. Society should support the development of the capabilities of all its members. An example of this would be that if children are denied an education they are unable to do 'basic things' and their functionings will be severely impaired as adults (Sen, 2001, p. 284). Hence, it follows that an affordable education, a central concern of Sen's together with healthcare, is a substantive freedom which develops a person's capabilities to live a 'good life' (Sen, 2010, p. 282). Nussbaum (1997; 2010, p.7) proposes that an American-style liberal education for undergraduates develops the capabilities for students to live the 'good life'. She also develops a list of capabilities which she insists are necessary for the 'good life' (Nussbaum, 2011, pp.33-34). In contrast to Nussbaum, Sen (2001, p.287) does not provide lists of capabilities but places emphasis on the voices of people in determining what they think are valued capabilities. As such, according to Sen (2001) participatory deliberation is necessary to throw light on what students value. This dissertation is inspired by a vision of a future in which education is focused on developing students' capabilities, away from the overemphasis on

productivism. A vision in which FE and HE college graduates are equipped with the capabilities to lead a life they have good reason to value (Sen, 2010, p. 18), necessitates making a political choice on which capabilities should be developed. Walker (2006, 2010, 2019) talks extensively about capabilities and HE, she links expanding capabilities through education to particular pedagogical approaches. I will draw on Walker to explore an education which is centred on the aspirations and values of students rather than just on the economic imperative.

The context in which the students live is very important. The effective freedoms, or capabilities a person has depend on the nature of social arrangements in the society and state in which they live (Sen, 2001, p.288). Malta, a small island nation in the Mediterranean Sea, became an independent state in 1964 after a hundred and sixty-four years as a British colony. The British influence on education is still evident, the lower status of vocational education being one effect of this influence (Wheelahan, 2009, p.32). The lower status of vocational education is also reported in Finland and Greece (Brunila *et al.*, 2011; Kiprianos and Christodoulou, 2015). Students and society may perceive MCAST degrees to be less prestigious than degrees from the University of Malta. This, in turn, may affect their preferences, aspirations and capabilities development, with students adjusting their expectations to what they see as feasible (Sen, 2010, p.283). I will argue that although individuals have different aspirations and visions of the good life, it is society and its structures that constrain their agency to achieve their desired capabilities and convert these into valued functionings. As expected the structure and nature of Maltese society also affects students' perceptions of the 'good life'. The traditional Maltese conservative Catholic view of the family and woman's caregiving role, for example, and the reality of female students who are tertiary educated may affect what students value (Camilleri-Cassar, 2017). The centrality of the family to students and the small distances in Malta will also affect how students view life (Visanich, 2017). Malta's 'catholicism' also, to a certain extent affects school curricula, with the Maltese seen as 'some single unit with one belief system' (Borg and Mayo, 2006, p.44). As will be shown, this traditional and conservative culture was mentioned particularly by female participants in relation to the role of women in society, and the differences in perceptions between them and their mothers.

The students taking part in this study were students reading for Bachelor of Science degrees in Health Sciences, Chemical Technology and Environmental Engineering degrees at the Institute of Applied Sciences at the MCAST campus in Paola, Malta. Given the

importance of student voice to my study, I chose to use focus groups and semi-structured interviews as my data collection tools. Sen (2001, p. 18) proposes deliberation as core to his approach to getting to know what people want for themselves (*ibid.*, p.31). During focus group sessions students, could discuss and deliberate, while semi-structured interviews provided a space for individual students to speak freely and in detail about their experience of education, work, family, their peers and their future aspirations.

The research questions are the following:

Research Question 1 - What is the students' conception of the 'good life' and what do they have 'good reason to value' (Sen, 2001, pp.74-75)?

Research Question 2 - What opportunities do they feel education is offering them to develop their capabilities; or what constraints do they think they have in achieving their vision of the 'good life'?

Research Question 3 - What is the students' take on the prevalent human capital discourse on education? (MCAST, 2015). While the college emphasises 'preparation for work' – how do the students see themselves? How is their choice of subjects related to their vision of 'the good life'?

On answering Research Question 1, I will explore what students value in education. Their opinions of how they were and are taught and treated at school and at college, and what they want to do after finishing from college. Research Question 2 builds on the first question. Students live in a context, a society. Discussing their preferences and their views on the structures, systems and methods used at college and their aspirations for life will help me come up with a list of capabilities – the real freedoms students value, but also what they think are the obstacles or the aspects which empower them to develop their capabilities, the 'conversion factors'. Research Question 3, that is, asking students about what they think education should prepare them for, about the aim of education, will help me explore whether the discourse in policy documents, that is the emphasis on education as the preparation for work, is affecting students' views on the issue. Their views on the aims of education may also affect which capabilities they value most, the pedagogical styles they prefer and also their plans and aspirations for the future.

Chapter outline

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. I will provide a brief outline of the content and purpose of Chapters Two through Chapter Six hereunder.

Chapter Two sets the scene by describing the structure of the college in which my study is based. It also include a brief history of the education system in Malta, focusing on technical and vocational education taking us all the way to the present. The structure of today's post-compulsory system is described, explaining the differences, perceived or otherwise, between the so-called 'academic' and 'vocational' post-compulsory paths. The ideological underpinning of post-compulsory education policies, both Maltese and those of the European Union, is evaluated, together with a discussion of the neoliberal conceptualisation of education.

Chapter Three is a detailed exposé of the conceptual framework on which this dissertation is based. In it I describe the capabilities approach as an alternative to the pervasive human capital model of education and instead focus on education as a means of human flourishing. The concepts of agency, adaptive preferences, capabilities and functionings are discussed. I choose to operationalise Sen's version of the capabilities approach, with capabilities - that is what students value - derived from the study itself, rather than using a pre-determined list.

Chapter Four meanwhile describes the methodology used in this study, which revolves around student voice. The research tools chosen and explained are semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Ethical considerations, research design and the mechanisms of thematic analysis are explained.

Chapter Five consists of the interpretation of the interview and focus group data. Valued capabilities or 'freedoms', are identified. The themes emerging from the data from the interviews and focus groups about student experience in compulsory education and at post-compulsory institutions including at MCAST; students' educational trajectories and choices; and their aspirations for the future including their working life and their views on the 'good life' are analysed in the framework of the capabilities approach.

Chapter Six is the concluding chapter in which the capabilities and conversion factors

identified in Chapter Five, as well as a implications of this research for professional practice and for post-compulsory technical and vocational education are discussed.

Chapter Two – Further and Higher Education in Malta

The aim of this study is to elicit student voice regarding what they deem to be 'the good life' and how their educational trajectory is hindering or helping them develop what Sen (1992, p.40) defines as capabilities - 'the freedom to lead one type of life or another', which in turn enable them to achieve valued functionings - the actual choices people are able to make. The society in which students are situated, particularly the educational system in which the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) operates cannot be ignored, since societal structures affect what students are able to achieve and the type of life they are effectively free to choose for themselves (Sen, 1992, p.72). I will set the scene by giving a description of the structure of MCAST. A short historical overview of the development of education in Malta, and technical education in particular will follow. This is very important to help put the study into perspective. For practical purposes, and since this is not meant to be a historical study, I choose to start the overview from the reconstruction period following World War Two, when Malta, then still a British colony, had to rebuild itself and get back on its feet. A discussion on non-university post-compulsory institutions and vocational education and training will ensue. A critique of policies regarding this sector will conclude this chapter.

The Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology

With its variety of course offerings from the very basic entry level ones to degrees, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology's (MCAST) remit is very wide. It caters for students who have either completed their compulsory five years of secondary schooling at age fifteen or their two-year sixth-form education with different entry-points into the courses offered. Similar institutions exist in other countries, from Further Education colleges offering Higher Education courses, to comprehensive or dual-sector universities offering qualifications spanning Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) (Moodie, 2008, pp.128-133; Garrod and Macfarlane, 2009, p.6). MCAST is divided into six institutes: the Institute of Applied Sciences, the Institute for the Creative Arts, the Institute of Engineering and Transport, the Institute of Business Management and Commerce, the Institute of Community Services, the Institute of Information and Communication Technology, together with a Gozo Campus which offers courses from

across a number of areas on the island of Gozo[1]. Academic staff based in their respective institute may teach, depending on their qualifications, courses at different levels on the qualifications framework. There are no particularly different working conditions or teaching loads whatever the level of courses staff teach. The maximum teaching load is from fifteen to seventeen hours per week, recently going down from nineteen hours. The courses offered span the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF), from foundation courses at MQF Levels 1, 2 and 3, to Advanced Diploma courses at MQF Level 4; and Higher Diplomas, Bachelor's and Master's degrees at MQF Levels 5, 6 and 7 respectively (MCAST, nd). The Malta Qualifications Framework is pegged to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) , with the addition of very basic qualifications below MQF Level 1. Table 2.1 below shows the MQF and EQF levels, with examples of qualifications.

MQF / EQF levels	Examples of qualifications	Minimum credits required for qualification
8	Doctoral Degree Third Cycle Bologna Process	NA#
7	Master's Second Cycle Bologna Process	90-120
	Post-graduate Diploma	60
	Post-graduate Certificate	30
6	Bachelor's/Bachelor's Honours First cycle Bologna Process	180-240##
5	Short Cycle Qualification VET Higher Diploma First two years of a Bachelor degree	120###
4	VET Level 4 Advanced Diploma	120
	MATSEC Certificate (Advanced & Intemediate Levels)	NA
3	VET Level 3 Diploma	60
	SEC Certificate (Ordinary Levels)	NA
2	Level 2 VET Foundation Certificate	60
	General or Subject certificate	NA
1	Level 1 VET Introductory Certificate	40
	General or Subject certificate	NA
Introductory Level A*	Preparatory programme	30
Introductory Level B*	Pre-entry basic skills course	30

*MQF only; #Not applicable; ##120 credits at Level 5; ###another 60 credits at Level 6 lead to a Bachelor's degree.

Table 2.1 – The Malta and European Qualifications Frameworks modified and expanded from NCHFE (nd).

[1] The island of Gozo is an island off the North coast of the island of Malta, accessible by a 25 minute journey by ferry. At the end of 2017 the population of the island of Malta was 442,978, whilst that of the island of Gozo was, much smaller, at 32,723 (NSO, 2019a, p.15).

Students with no prior qualifications, considered as those who have 'failed' secondary school can join courses at MCAST at Levels 1 and 2. These are what might be termed 'second chance' secondary school level courses. Although these include some vocational components, they consist of a good number of 'key skills' modules, revising secondary school core subjects such as Mathematics, English, Maltese, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and Personal and Social Development. Level 3 courses are accessed by those who have minimal qualifications at secondary school level, that is a Secondary Education Certificate (SEC), also known as Ordinary or 'O' Levels, in at least two subjects. Sometimes students who do not have the required SEC in the required subjects for the vocational course they wish to follow, choose to enter at Level 3, before continuing their studies at Level 4. Students who have at least four SEC subjects, in a combination depending on their chosen area of study can access Level 4 Advanced Diploma courses directly. These courses are equivalent to 'Advanced Level' academic courses on the qualifications framework. Students who achieve a specific combination of SEC qualifications, namely six subjects, including Maltese, English, Mathematics, one Science subject and one other subject, can choose to take the 'academic sixth-form' route at the University of Malta's Junior College or at other state or private sixth-form colleges (JC, nd). Preparation for entry into the University of Malta entails obtaining a Matriculation Certificate (MATSEC) in six subjects, two at Advanced Level, three at Intermediate Level and 'Systems of Knowledge', which can be described as a general knowledge or 'liberal education' course (UoM, 2017).

Access to MCAST's Level 4 Advanced Diploma courses is more open, in that the combination of prior qualifications required is more flexible and less rigid. The same flexibility holds for access to HE courses. Entry requirements for a Level 5 course at MCAST, are either an MCAST Level 4 Advanced Diploma, or two subjects at MATSEC Advanced Level and two at Intermediate Level. The first two years of a Bachelor's degree are at MQF Level 5, and the final third year is set at MQF Level 6. Students completing the first two years can opt to exit college, claiming a Higher Diploma. The students who took part in this study are following Bachelor of Science Honours courses in either Chemical Technology, Environmental Engineering or Health Science. The entry requirements for the Chemical Technology course are either the MCAST Level 4 Advanced Diploma in Applied Science, or two MATSEC Advanced Level (A-Level) subjects, one of which is Chemistry, and two Intermediate Level (I-Level) subjects. The preferred subjects, other

than the compulsory Chemistry are Biology, Physics and Mathematics (BCT, nd). For admission into Environmental Engineering, students need an MCAST Advanced Diploma in either Applied Science or Environmental Sustainability or two MATSEC A-Levels, one of which is either Physics, Mathematics, Chemistry or Biology, and any two I-Levels (BEE, nd). For the Health Science degree, the entry requirements are either of the MCAST Advanced Diplomas for Pharmacy Technicians or Health Sciences, or two MATSEC A-Levels, one of which must be Biology, and two I-Levels. The preferred subjects, apart from the compulsory A-Level in Biology, are Chemistry and Physics (BHS, nd).

MCAST's structure is a product of its history as an alternative to the University of Malta. A history which saw it founded when Malta was on its way out of British colonial domination; but, also a history affected by attitudes to vocational and technical education.

General and technical education in Malta - an overview

The history of a country effects attitudes and perceptions of people. As Freire (2016a, p.7) says 'history conditions us', although not necessarily 'determines us'. Borg and Mayo (2006, p.122), for example, describe how the adoption of British textbooks in Maltese schools, a legacy of colonialism, presented students with a reality which was not theirs and made them feel outsiders in their own country. It is an example of the uncritical adoption of the colonizer's methods and systems, assumed to be superior. Malta's colonial inheritance is quite evident when looking, even superficially, at the structure of the country's education system. Taylor (2016, p.3) in her overview of vocational education in Canada, also speaks of the effect of British colonial inheritance. One effect of this is that so-called academic education is privileged over vocational or technical education. History helps set the scene and helps explain public and student perceptions of different types of education, the constraints they perceive they have or the opportunities they think they have or should be offered. It helps reveal the interests behind policy decisions (*ibid.*, p.4) and the ideological invisible hand defining what is accepted as 'common sense'. History helps in our understanding on what forms of knowledge, educational institutions and pedagogies are privileged over others and why they are privileged (Giroux, 2016, pp.192-193). A historical background, in this case related to the development of education in Malta, including post-compulsory and higher technical and vocational education, is important since history gives an insight into the structures of society and the attitudes to education and educational institutions which form over time (Sultana, 2017, p.xxi). Past decisions,

plans and the changes in organisations and ideologies over time shape today's policies, plans, organisations and attitudes (Alridge, 2015, p.103). Locating my research on student capabilities (Sen, 1992) in a historical context helps me interpret, attempt to understand and analyse how perceptions, opinions, feelings and student aspirations fit and are affected by the society in which they live and how institutional policies have developed (Wilson-Strydom and Walker, 2015).

Similar to other Anglophone former British colonies and dependencies, the Maltese education system follows to some extent the British model (Cutajar, 2007; Vallejo and Dooly, 2008). Malta gained independence from Britain in 1964, but remained a monarchy with the British Monarch as head of state until 1974, when it became a Republic. British military bases closed in 1979, when British Forces, on which the Maltese economy depended heavily, left the islands. The post-world war education system was 'tripartite', with selective examinations at the end of the primary school cycle. Students were streamed into grammar schools called 'lyceums', area secondary schools and secondary technical schools. Lyceums prepared what were considered as academically inclined students for entry to the then Royal University of Malta. Several secondary technical schools, based on the British model, were established in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, and emphasised academic instruction in engineering and technology (Cedefop, 2017a, p.21). The prejudice against technical education goes far back. Sultana (1992, pp.149-150) speaks of a 'general bias' against technical education and the lack of status of technical schools even in the immediate post-WWII years. The prevalent 'common sense', expressed by various colonial British experts and commissions, based on the psychology of the nineteen-fifties, according to Sultana (1992, pp.163-164), was that there were two types of students, those preferring abstract thinking, and others who preferred concrete 'operational tasks'. In parallel with the new Secondary Technical Schools, the first Technical Institute for post-compulsory further technical studies was established in the late nineteen-fifties (*ibid.*, p.170). Here again, the Technical Institute faced the same prejudice of other technical schools. In an attempt to make technical education more prestigious, secondary technical schools shared the same entrance examinations for secondary lyceums and led to the British General Certificate of Education examinations. The rest attended non-selective area secondary schools, until they could leave compulsory education at fourteen. Authorities also emphasised that technical education should not be confused with non-selective forms of education, such was the prejudice against technical institutes and secondary technical schools (*ibid.*, p.173). The prestige of secondary technical schools, as compared to the

lyceums seems to have picked up by the late sixties, according to Sultana (1992, pp.174-175) 'at least partly due to a structure of rewards in the labour market for those who completed a technical education'. The increase in prestige could also have been due to the plans to offer higher technical education through the establishment of a polytechnic. Technical Institute students could not access Higher Education (HE) courses at the Royal University of Malta.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the British Colonial Development and Welfare Fund funded the project to set up the Malta Polytechnic Institute, later renamed the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). This project, the idea for which developed in the late fifties, was initiated in 1961 (Sultana, 1992, pp.175-176); although the actual 'ribbon-cutting' only came in 1970 (Galea, 2003). Funding was obtained through a United Nations fund to promote engineering education. Colonial development funds contributed to the building of a campus for the institute, alongside funds and administrative support from the local government (UNESCO, 1969, pp.11-14). Between 1961 and 1966 a total of 1,175 students attended the newly set up polytechnic (*ibid.*, p.15). The setting up of MCAST preceded by a few years the setting up of polytechnics in England and Wales. In the UK the polytechnic policy for England and Wales was announced 1965, with 30 polytechnics designated in September 1968 (Pratt, 1997, p.1). The same so called 'binary policy' in HE was adopted in Malta. MCAST was to provide post-secondary technical courses at certificate, diploma, higher diploma and degree level, including courses in Mechanical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Ancillary Sciences and Mathematics. Similar to the UK, where polytechnic degrees were awarded by a national awarding body (*ibid.*, p.122), MCAST's degrees were awarded by another body, in the case of MCAST, by the then Royal University of Malta. Departments of commerce, catering and food technology and arts were also introduced (UNESCO, 1969, p.2). Following the English polytechnic model (Pratt, 1997, p.3) MCAST was also eventually tasked with teacher training. In 1975 the teacher training colleges which were run by Catholic religious orders were absorbed into MCAST (Borg and Mayo, 2015, p.184). The established University of Malta resisted the introduction of degrees in subjects and areas such as Engineering, Business and Commerce, Accountancy and even Education, preferring the *status quo* of preparing a limited number of students for the traditional elite professions, namely Law, Theology and Medicine (Mayo, 2017, p.303).

In the process of a controversial Higher Education reform process, the Faculties of Arts, Pure Science and Theology at the University of Malta were abolished in a bid, by the Labour government of the time, to make the university more responsive to economic imperatives and utilitarian aims, namely the industrialisation of a country fresh out of colonial rule (Mayo, 2017, p.304). In 1978 MCAST was briefly converted into the 'New University', awarding its own degrees in the newer 'utilitarian' subjects. This second Maltese university was short lived since after two years it was absorbed into the University of Malta (Borg and Mayo, 2015, pp.184-185; Mayo, 2017, p.302). Courses at below degree level were moved to specialist schools and technical institutes. Mayo (2017, p.311) suggests that the elimination of MCAST, after it was first upgraded to the New University and then absorbed into the University of Malta, meant that the availability and accessibility of post-compulsory and pre-University technical courses was reduced. Entry into the now only state university was through examinations in academic subjects only - the British Ordinary and Advanced Levels. The academic-vocational divide became starker.

The negative perceptions of vocational education were probably boosted earlier still, when the then newly elected Labour government, led by Prime Minister Dom Mintoff, arguably abruptly and without proper planning, turned the secondary school system non-selective and comprehensive in 1972 (Zammit Marmara, 2017, p.273). The school leaving age was raised to sixteen from fourteen and vocational secondary schools called 'trade-schools' were established. After only two years of general education in secondary schools, students could opt to move to a trade-school. Data and studies quoted by Sultana (1995) show that, apart from the exodus from state schools to Catholic Church schools following comprehensivisation, the separate trade-schools led to increased social segregation of students. The vast majority of trade-school students came from working-class, manual work backgrounds. Social reproduction was a probably unintended effect, with the schools preparing students for low-end factory jobs with little possibility of transfer to other types of schools and higher levels of education (*ibid.*). 42% of boys attended private, mostly Catholic Church schools by 1977 (Zammit Marmara, 2017, p.282). There were more schools catering for boys than girls in the private and church sector. This was also reflected in what Zammit Marmara (2017, p.282) calls 'more problematic' boys' state comprehensives than 'problematic' girls' comprehensives. As private and Church schools, creamed off middle-class students from state comprehensives, comprehensive state schools lowered their standards and trade-schools catered for the remaining students. The negative perceptions of vocational and technical education were sown, bloomed and persisted from

the very beginning of the development of the education system in post-colonial Malta.

Comprehensivisation was considered a failure and after only nine years of comprehensive schools, in 1981 Grammar-school type lyceums with entry examinations were reintroduced; and, the tri-partite system re-established (Zammit Marmara, 2017, p.294). A few years later following a change in government in 1987 secondary trade-schools were abolished. In another twist of history in 2010 lyceum school entrance examinations were held for the last time (Timesofmalta.com, 2010), state schools became comprehensive once again and state secondary schools became co-educational. In 2017 53% of students in compulsory education attended state schools, 36% attended Catholic schools and 11% attended fee-paying private or independent schools (Cedefop, 2017a, p.21).Catholic schools are heavily subsidised by the state, in return for an agreement with the state also making them comprehensive. Catholic secondary schools (and most Catholic primary schools) cater only for either girls or boys separately.

After a hiatus of 21 years, MCAST was re-established in 2001, bringing together various post-secondary state schools including Technical Institutes, the Building and Construction School, the Secretarial School, the School of Hairdressing, an Art and Design school and a 'pre-vocational' Health Care School (Galea, 2003). It began offering Bachelor's degrees in 2009 (Borg, 2017, p.279), providing an alternative route to Higher Education. The only possible route previously was through academic post-compulsory institutions preparing for entry into the long-established University of Malta.

Article 90 of the Education Act (1988) tasks MCAST to 'award such degrees, diplomas, certificates or other distinctions which it may deem suitable to such candidates who satisfy the prescribed conditions after following the required study courses', and for it to be accessible to all by providing entry level courses for students without prior qualifications, together with access to each person at first level independently of any academic qualifications. This contrasts with institutions such as the University of Malta Junior College, a sixth-form college, which caters only for students obtaining specific qualifications and prepares students for entry to University of Malta degree courses.

Non-university post-compulsory institutions

As described in more detail earlier on, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) is different from other post-compulsory institutions in Malta. Whereas both public and private sixth-forms prepare students for the University of Malta Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) examinations board Advanced and Intermediate Level examinations, MCAST offers its own courses, spanning the whole Maltese Qualifications Framework (MQF), from secondary school MQF Levels 1, 2, and 3, to the 'technician' level, Level 4, up to the undergraduate Levels 5 and 6, and more recently Level 7 Master's.

MCAST can be compared to other non-university institutions around the world. Garrod and Macfarlane (2009, p.6) describe the growth of so-called 'dual-sector' or 'comprehensive post-compulsory' institutions in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa and England. These institutions, somewhat similar to MCAST, provide both Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) qualifications. Other terms used to describe such schools, include FE colleges, community colleges, junior colleges and hybrid institutions. In a discussion about the merger between Thames Valley University (TVU), itself a former polytechnic in England, and Reading College, Garrod (2009, p.77) describes TVU as a university with a high proportion of 'further education activity'. This made TVU ideal for studying the character and challenges of dual sector institutions. Similar to MCAST, the new TVU, which eventually changed its name to University of West London (THE, 2010), offered various entry and exit points, widening access to people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, with different prior-qualifications and with different interests and abilities. According to Garrod (2009, p.88), despite a clearer path leading from further education to higher education courses progression rates remained low, with some students transferring to what are considered as more elite universities. Other students needed help to 'cross the bridge' between FE and HE, even if within TVU itself. With FE being more teacher directed while HE requiring more independent learning, some students found it difficult to bridge this difference in style (*ibid.*, p.90). Wheelahan (2009, p.29) argues that institutions which offer a range of courses with different entry points at different levels contribute to social justice, however, having different institutions with different types of qualifications, may also lead to social stratification, and a system defined by hierarchies and status, with the long standing, more prestigious, traditional institutions such as 'single sector' universities occupying the top of the hierarchy.

Studies (Wheelahan, 2009, p.32) show that most dual-sector institutions had 'teaching-led' cultures, while elite universities emphasised a 'research-led' culture'. MCAST was re-founded as an amalgam of different state post-secondary institutions, and although it started offering its own degree programmes, the institution probably inherited a 'teaching-led' institutional culture from the post-secondary schools which were absorbed by it.

Dual-sector institutions may try to improve status through a process of academicization (Pinheiro and Kyvik, 2009, p.56). In the case of MCAST research groups have been set up, and Master's by research degrees are being offered (Timesofmalta.com, 2015; Timesofmalta.com, 2019). Curiously, the University of Malta, which also embraced 'vocationalisation' makes it a point to emphasise that its courses prepare students for the world of work. Offering a wide range of vocational courses preparing students for specific professions, be it nurses, physiotherapists, medical laboratory analysts, accountants, architects and engineers, along the more traditional humanities, suggests that it derives its status from offering only degree courses, its long history, its more onerous entry requirements, its research endeavours and through its traditional offerings such as Law, Medicine and Theology.

The introduction of degrees at MCAST, while also offering a clear and sometimes the only path to its students to progress to HE in Malta, may also be construed as an attempt to improve MCAST's status. Since the 'academic' label is seen as more prestigious, non-university post-compulsory colleges seeking to mimic selective research universities, may drop remedial or lower level programmes, add higher degrees such as Master's and Doctorates, and make admission requirements more onerous (Grubb and Lazerson, 2007, pp.81-82). As regards MCAST, the institution is regulated by the Education Act (1988) and by a government appointed Board of Governors, so any such changes or further academic drift depends on the policies of the government and parties in power. Figures obtained from MCAST Registrar's Office (in Table 2.2 below) for academic years 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 show that 39% and 35% of students respectively were enrolled in Level 4 Advanced Diploma courses. Of the students in their final year of their Level 4 Advanced Diploma course in 2017/2018 only around 28% progressed to HE courses at MCAST. A notable 34% and 36% of students at MCAST during academic years 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 respectively were HE students following Levels 5, 6 and 7 courses. The majority of HE students at the college, 61.7% in 2018/2019, accessed

MCAST through other academic qualifications obtained outside the college, for example, at a sixth-form.

	Academic year 2017/2018	**Academic year 2018/2019**
Total students at MCAST	7408	7792
Total students Level 4 Advanced Diploma courses (as % of total students)	2879 (39%)	2766 (35%)
Total Higher Education students at MCAST (Levels 5, 6 and 7) (as % of total students)	2535 (34%)	2841 (36%)
Total students reading for a Bachelor's degree or Higher Diploma	2488	2544
New students accessing Bachelor's and Higher Diploma courses from outside MCAST (HE 1st years)	829	835
Students progressing from MCAST Level 4 courses to HE courses (HE 1st years)	511	536
Number of students in their second and final year of Level 4 Advanced Diploma courses in 2017/2018	1883	
% of Level 4 Advanced Diploma final year students in 2017/2018 progressing to HE courses in 2018/2019		28%

Table 2.2 – Students at MCAST for academic years 2017/2018 and 2018/2019.

Students following Level 4 courses gain a technical qualification with which they can find work at technician level. Anecdotally students speak of employers offering them jobs while on apprenticeship, which is two days a week during term time and a normal working week during school holidays. This may explain the relatively high student attrition from Level 4 to HE Levels 5 and 6 courses. The University of Malta, the only other state and tuition free HE institution does not normally accept MCAST's Level 4 Advanced Diplomas for entry to its courses. While the expansion of vocational higher education contributes to attracting more students to HE, students from MCAST out of necessity can

only progress through MCAST itself, with very few exceptions. Additionally, MCAST offers mostly technical and professional subjects, so students who are interested in subjects such as History, languages and other humanities cannot access these courses through MCAST, not at the lower access levels, nor at Advanced Diploma and degree level. Another issue, affecting perceptions of MCAST, and shared with other non-university or even newer universities (Boliver, 2015) is the issue of prestige, or rather lack of it. In a report on post-secondary education in Malta (MfEE, 2017), which focuses on students choosing the sixth-form route, the negative attitudes to other pathways is highlighted. It is reported that while some students 'would have preferred more hands-on courses at MCAST', they chose a sixth-form college because MCAST 'lacked the prestige or status' *(ibid.,* p.115). The report says that academic routes and qualifications seem to be clearer to students, while the vocational route is deemed 'confusing and complex' (*ibid.,* p.56). The academic-vocational duality, it reports, is 'not conducive to good learning and teaching practices' (*ibid.,* p.114), particularly since according to the report, teaching in sixth-forms is characterised by in class, transmission style teaching, with students memorising facts for end of course examinations, in which students regurgitate their 'knowledge' (*ibid.,* pp.28-29).

Atkins and Flint (2015) quote British students expressing the view that society perceives vocational programmes as of lower value than academic programmes. Nussbaum (1997, pp.30-31) speaks about the difference between universities in Europe and in the United States. She describes how in Europe students focus on one area of studies, while in the United States Bachelor's degrees require all students to study 'a core of common studies that is essential for the good life of each and every person' (*ibid.,* p.31). However, Nussbaum seems to ignore the issue of who is able to access these courses at prestigious colleges and universities. Even more so because of the high tuition fees, this may make 'prestige' or 'quality' only available to the well-to-do. Historically prestigious liberal arts colleges educated 'the children of privilege', with less prestigious 'community colleges' offering two-year associate degrees to those who could not access four-year colleges and prestigious universities (Harbour, 2015, p.30).

The assumption that education means the formation of a good citizen, overlooks the fact that education, even more so at higher levels, was designed for the privileged few and the preparation of those from socio-economic classes who could afford to spend time on an extended period of schooling. It is in the interest of these classes to accentuate the differences between so called 'academic' and 'vocational' streams to preserve their

perceived status in society. The debates on supposedly different types of education are framed in polar opposites. A more productive discussion should avoid 'either-or' positions (Grubb and Lazerson, 2007, pp.23-24). Grubb and Lazerson (2007, p.59) hold United States State Universities as examples of institutions which manage to combine practical knowledge and liberal education for professional and occupational preparation. Echoing Dewey (2008a, pp.328) they eschew the false dichotomies of 'academic' versus 'vocational' education and deem it possible to strengthen both 'occupational preparation and liberal learning' by developing programmes integrating academic and professional content, connecting 'classrooms to the workplace in mutually beneficial ways' (Grubb and Lazerson, 2007, p.82). Lum (2009, p.176) refutes the vocational as different from the academic, especially at higher levels. He insists that impoverishing vocational preparation as 'learning skills in isolation' is a disservice to students and contends that a wider understanding of a subject or discipline is necessary. He argues that physical action and knowledge are intertwined and feed off each other rendering the supposed difference between 'vocational and liberal' untenable and based on false premises (*ibid.*, p.52). The difference may only be of a semantic nature.

Despite various arguments rebutting the vocational-academic dichotomy, vocational education institutions are still considered as second-tier, while 'academic' institutions are considered more prestigious, even though in various countries HE has drifted towards a more vocational or neoliberal outlook, that of preparing students for the demands of the economy (Grubb and Lazerson, 2007, p.57). They preserve their prestige by recruiting from the more traditionally qualified students. For example, while colleges in Scotland which offer short cycle 'higher diploma' programmes for access to universities are reported to be considerably successful, the opportunities for these students to gain access to more prestigious universities is very limited (Gallacher and Ingram, 2012, pp.105-106). The perceptions and attitudes towards non-university institutions and their perceived lower status is made clear in the study by the Maltese National Commission for Further and Higher Education, *The Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life* (NCFHE, 2014, pp.123-124). The study on students in Further and Higher Education reports an apparent link between the highest education attained by students' parents and the perceived social standing of students' parents. The higher the level of education attained by students' parents, the higher the perceived social standing reported by the students themselves. More students whose parents' hold Bachelor's or Master's qualification, are likely to perceive their parents' social standing as very high, at 5.6% and 8.0% respectively. In contrast only

0.9% of students, whose parents have at most compulsory education, consider their parents' social standing as very high. 22.5%, of these students consider their parents' social standing as low. A telling sign of the somewhat low esteem in which technical and vocational qualifications are held is that students whose parents attained post-secondary academic qualifications such as 'Advanced Levels', by attending sixth-form colleges, pegged at Level 4 on the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF), assess their parents' social standing as higher than students whose parents had attained vocational and technical Higher Diplomas at MQF Level 5 from technical institutes. This might reflect the bias towards 'academic' qualifications and institutions such that 'academic' qualifications even at a lower level are considered more prestigious than 'vocational' qualifications at a higher level.

The discourse around employability and education as preparation for work is pervasive even in relation to Higher Education (HE), with the *Higher Education Strategy for Malta* (NCFHE, 2015) a case in point. However, longstanding universities and traditional qualifications seem to be able to maintain the aura of 'academic' prestige despite what is described by Chertkovskaya *et al.* (2013) as the colonisation of HE by the demands of the labour market. Employability for these institutions is implied by virtue of students obtaining qualifications from them (Stoten, 2018). There are other factors which seem to prop up this prestige, not least that universities such as the University of Malta historically catered for the elite and for prestigious professions (Mayo, 2017, p.301). The attitudes towards vocational education seem to be confirmed in the Cedefop survey on attitudes towards vocational education in the European Union (EU) (Cedefop, 2017b). While 89% of respondents in Malta, the highest percentage from all EU countries, agreed that post-compulsory or upper-secondary vocational education for 16 to 18-year-old students had a positive image (*ibid.*, p.32), 88% also say that general academic education has a more positive image than vocational education (*ibid.*, p.37). Vocational education is also overwhelmingly seen as the path for students with low grades, with 76% of respondents agreeing with this statement, very close to the EU average of 75% (*ibid.*, pp.38-39). The perception that vocational education is direct preparation for the job market is very strong, with 92% of respondents agreeing that vocational students learn skills needed by employers (*ibid.*, p.41). The discourse in policies regarding education, vocational education in particular, seems to be resonating with the general population.

The ideology of discourse in post-compulsory education policies

The discourse about education and in particular about what is termed as 'vocational' education at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) may influence students' perceptions on the aims of education and their views on what education will help them achieve. In this section I will discuss both Maltese vocational education and training (VET) and Higher Education policies. European Union (EU) policies and other policies regarding education by international organisations and individual countries will also be touched upon. MCAST provides VET courses both at Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) levels. Students who access MCAST degree courses in particular, may come from 'academic' sixth-forms or from MCAST's own Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) Level 4 Advanced Diploma courses.

Malta is an EU member state since 2004, and as discussed earlier on, in the British sphere of influence having been a British colony from 1800 until 1964. As discussed earlier, the modelling of the education system on British, or more specifically English models is well documented (Borg and Mayo, 2006, pp.119-122; Chircop, 2017). Being close to mainland Europe and with the political decision to seek accession to the European Union, the influence of EU strategy or policy statements on the education system, especially on FE and HE is also quite clear. Although the EU has no direct competencies in education and it is the nation states which mould education policy, the ideological framing of policy seems to be set at EU level (Dale, 2005). Powell *et al.* (2012) speak of the inevitability of a common ideological framework since national civil servants and officials interact with stakeholders and other officials from other EU member states in negotiations on policy texts. Powell *et al.* (2012) insist, for instance, that the Copenhagen Declaration on enhanced cooperation in VET (European Commission, 2002), exerts direct pressure on national systems, influencing policy debates and decisions at the national level.

This influence appears evident in the Maltese *National Vocational Education and Training Policy* (NVETP) (MCAST, 2015, pp. 20-23). The policy document maps the deliverables of another EU VET policy document, the Bruges Communiqué (European Commission, 2010b) to the policy actions planned nationally. National policies are sometimes justified to the national electorate by referring to EU documents. Ravinet (2008), analysing the effects on national policy of the HE Bologna Process document, terms the supposedly

'elastic and informal process' and the collegial consensus-seeking negotiation process a myth, and contends that it was the four major EU powers, namely Germany, France, the UK and Italy that called the shots. Cort (2010) makes similar observations regarding the Danish VET policy. The discourse in the Danish policy resonates with that in EU policies with a 'hegemonic discourse' and emphasis on growth and inclusion, which discourse is similar across the globe. Social inclusion is interpreted as providing an education or rather training, for employment. Cort's (2010) analysis can easily be applied to the Maltese NVETP. Another policy document which affects MCAST, particularly HE courses at the college is the *Higher Education Strategy for Malta* (NCFHE, 2015). The strategy calls for gender balance in different areas of study and for research into the career choices of males and females (*ibid.*, p.21). More women are presumably needed in the workforce to enhance competitiveness. The Maltese Higher Education strategy (*ibid.*, p.21) also puts emphasis on labour market needs, to provide the market with highly educated workers, which presumably makes the country more competitive and promotes economic growth.

The strategy mentions increasing employability and entrepreneurship as one of the priority areas. At MCAST, in fact all Bachelor's degree students must take a unit on entrepreneurship, as do Level 4 Advanced Diploma students. The choice of entrepreneurship as a compulsory subject for all at MCAST seems to be implementing the HE strategy's recommendations together with the strategy's push for making education relevant to the labour market (NCFHE, 2015, p.27). It assumes a competitive, individualist and profit-driven conception of society. Students are assumed to engage in behaviours from which they derive maximum benefits, and as a result responding to labour market needs is assumed to make VET more attractive to them. The major enticement for educational choices is the purported economic rewards students will reap following their education and training (Baptiste, 2001; Fredman, 2014). The 'more skills, higher income' mantra is taken for granted. Social context and the role of society or the state in shaping the economy is not mentioned. According to Volkmann and Audretsch (2017, pp.1-2) entrepreneurship education has spread across European private and public universities and polytechnics, supported by government institutions and the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD). The 'Bologna Process Revisited' document (EHEA, 2015, p.9) suggests 'supporting innovation, creativity, entrepreneurship in HE' with the aim of increasing employability and enhancing Europe's competitiveness. Halbfas (2017a, pp.302-303) describes a compulsory 'entrepreneurial new ideas course' in which Informatics Engineering students from the University of

Coimbra in Spain evaluate the market potential of their ideas. Students' ideas are marketable and monetised. Another example by Lilischkis (2017, p.491) describes how the University of Huddersfield in the United Kingdom targets all students to learn about 'enterprising and entrepreneurship', the teaching of which is 'everyone's responsibility' (*ibid.*, p.495). At the Leuphana University of Lüneberg in Germany entrepreneurship is integrated into teacher training programmes (Halbfas, 2017b, p.579) purportedly to make sure that all teachers are able to instil an entrepreneurial spirit in the students they will teach. Komulainen *et al.* (2011) report the resistance of teachers in Finland to the promotion of an entrepreneurial culture in schools. The capitalist values of competitiveness and individualism were seen to clash with schools' values of equality and participation. Problematically, boys were also deemed as more entrepreneurial and risk-taking, while girls as more passive and 'rule-following'.

Training in entrepreneurship and for labour market needs are so central to MCAST that the NVETP (MCAST, 2015) makes it a point to declare that MCAST's internal organisational structure is designed to ensure that curriculum development is tied to 'current and future economic needs' and promoting an entrepreneurial mindset (*ibid.*, p.15). Borg (2017, pp.286-287), writing about the organisational structures of public institutions offering HE courses, comments that at MCAST the highest official the 'Principal and CEO' is a 'business-centred' position. Unlike the University of Malta, MCAST has no academic-led Senate. The human capital theory, although not mentioned directly, permeates both the *National Vocational Education and Training Policy* (NVETP) (MCAST, 2015) and the *Higher Education Strategy for Malta* (NCFHE, 2015). The NVETP (MCAST, 2015, p.24) calls for a national vocational education and training (VET) steering group, which 'shall steer the anticipation of labour market and industry needs and advise policy-makers and VET providers on the responses [to labour market requirements]'. The policy demands 'proactive responses to planned and unplanned industry needs' and the involvement of the private sector in course design, what Ball (2013, p. 44) labels the 'privatization of policy'.

The constant emphasis on market needs, even the unplanned ones, in both documents and the direct reference to the market-centred opinions of the Malta Chamber of Commerce, reportedly shared by the then rector of the University of Malta, in the HE strategy (NCFHE, 2015, p.12) reveals an instrumental conception of education geared towards the building of the country's human capital and a conscious bias towards employers' visions of what state financed HE and FE institutions should aim for in their courses (Allais, 2012;

Keep, 2012; Fredman, 2014). Neoliberal ideas and communitarian ideas seem to inhabit the same policy documents, although the emphasis is heavily skewed towards satisfying labour market, industry and economic needs. Indeed, the concepts of outcomes-based and objectives-based approaches (MCAST, 2015, p.20) have been championed by both neoliberals and communitarians, the former concerned with the relevancy and instrumental nature of education to industry, and the latter with widening participation and social inclusion (Allais, 2012). Education for personal development, knowledge for its own sake, the development of a democratic society, and 'nation building' (Sahlberg, 2007; Patnaik, 2013) are absent from the documents.

The *National Vocational Education and Training Policy* (NVETP) (MCAST, 2015) and the Higher Education strategy (NCFHE, 2015) both position education as a servant of economic imperatives. What is good for the economy or finance is assumed to be good for the country as a whole. It is the market which shapes policy, not the other way round (Patnaik, 2013; Ball, 2013, p.61). López-Fogués (2012) laments a lack of discussion on alternatives to an instrumentalist conception of VET in Europe. The EU is still mostly an economic community, and policies, including those on education, are considered as effective in as far as they promote competitiveness and growth. The *Copenhagen Declaration* (European Commission, 2002, p.1) claims a direct causal relationship between better VET and 'strengthening Europe's competitive power worldwide'. The themes in the Maltese vocational education policy (MCAST, 2015) and the Higher Education strategy (NCFHE, 2015) reiterate ideas and policy proposals broached in the *Europe 2020* strategy (European Commission, 2010a), which aims to increase competitiveness through increasing participation in HE, and in the *Bruges Communiqué* (European Commission, 2010b), the *Copenhagen Declaration* (European Commission, 2002) and *Bologna Process* declarations and documents. The discourse in the EU's *Europe 2020* (European Commission, 2010a, pp.11-17) document centres around aligning education to the needs of the market. Competences acquired through all the 'types' of educational provision described in the document, whether general education, vocational education, Higher Education or adult education, and including 'non-formal' and 'informal learning' should all reflect the needs of the labour market. The market is made central to the lives of people at all stages, whether in school or outside school settings. No level or form of education or learning is to be left out of the effort to serve and satisfy market imperatives. Education and skills are 'growth enhancing items' (*ibid.*, p.24). VET and HE, are expected to contribute to economic growth, give students access to the labour market, and employers a

means of increasing productivity (Leney and Green, 2005). The policies and strategies, both the Maltese ones and the European Union's rest on the assumption that economic or competitive behaviour is part of human nature and is applicable to all aspects of life (Olssen *et al.*, 2004, p.153). Friedman (2002, p.101-107) posits that individuals should not be 'sheltered' by the state from competition for jobs, with vocational and professional education framed as an investment. Human capital investment, it is claimed, will indirectly lead to a more inclusive society. Cunningham (2004), on the other hand, contends that any personal payoffs are incidental or accidental. Arguably, both the NVETP's (MCAST, 2015) and the *Higher Education Strategy for Malta*'s (NCFHE, 2015) emphasise education institutions responding to labour market needs and echo EU declarations' framing education as valuable for its future income earning potential (Halpern, 2005, p.4). Despite this neoliberal stance public FE and HE in Malta are still tuition free, with students getting maintenance grants throughout their studies. So even if the policies and strategies emphasise education and VET as contributing to giving students, as future workers, skills to satisfy the demands of the labour market, access is state funded. Even if the student is prepared for what employers need through employer-led curricula, the system is not as neoliberal as proposed by Friedman (2002) with his espousal of people paying their way through professional education.

State provided and funded education seems to still resist the trend towards privatisation as is happening in countries such as England and the United States. Even though education in Malta is free, and post-compulsory students get monthly allowances, it may still be serving the interests of capital. It may be argued that in the case of Malta, state educational institutions at least at FE and HE levels are framed in policies as 'training departments' at the service of the economy and of companies and employers. The HE strategy (NCFHE, 2015, p.28) in fact calls for research on the development of the labour market and the specific 'knowledge, skills and competences' which employers desire. The NVETP (2015, p.28) highlights MCAST's focus on administrative processes which include consultation with employers' organisations to 'guarantee [the] relevance of the curriculum to meet the current and future economic needs' and on the 'modernising' of its curriculum 'to reflect present and future needs of industry focusing on enhancing employability to students'.

Powell *et al.*(2012) remark that the models of vocational and Higher Education emerging from the Bologna and Copenhagen processes put the onus on the individual to gain skills for employability, with issues such as social inclusion and equity barely mentioned and

tackled. Lorenz (2006) in a paper about Dutch Higher Education policy states that the country has been adopting the Bologna process' economic view of education since the 1980s, though a 'couple of Dutch peculiarities' remain. The Maltese HE strategy (NCFHE, 2015) refers to the Bologna process directly to justify its recommendations.

One of the criticisms of the human capital theory is that it ignores the social dimension - that some people are advantaged because of their social status or background (Tan, 2014). The primary role of education in human capital theory and neoliberalism is to serve the economy (Tanweer, 2017). Human capital theory assumes people are self-serving, atomistic beings and ignores the 'complexities of human emotion and motivation' (*ibid.*). Tanweer (2017) proposes that education should help individuals lead fulfilling lives and develop democratic values. Turning the tables, he contends that the purpose of economic activity should be the means to achieve the end, that is human flourishing made possible by education.

Flew (2014) describes the pervasiveness of the neoliberal conception of society seen as an enterprise, with social policies to support the core mission of promoting markets and competition. Chang (2011) posits that while education is valuable, the neoliberal assumption that more education leads to more productivity is a myth. According to Chang (2011, p.189) it is the availability of structures encouraging and supporting risk-taking, the organisation of enterprises as 'collective entities', the available capital for long-term investments, public subsidies for research, development and training and a good welfare state which encourage high productivity. The value of education lies in personal fulfilment and independence. This contrasts with the emphasis on education as a vehicle to increase competitiveness in policies. The NVETP (MCAST, 2015) ignores that students choose to study (or not to) beyond compulsory education for a variety of reasons. It assumes that 'making VET more attractive' will automatically entice young people to further their studies. The assumption of the policies seems to be that employer needs and student needs are superimposable and that the interests of employers are in synch with those of students (Baptiste, 2001). Other reasons for choosing a VET course - or rather 'choosing' MCAST rather than the more prestigious University of Malta, apart from investing in one's human capital, may be students not achieving entry requirements to a sixth-form, other social and cultural factors (Fredman, 2014) and factors such as the influence of parents, family, peers, social relationships, friendship networks and the individual's financial situation (Halpern, 2005, pp. 142-169). Tan (2014) also mentions studies pointing to a person's habits,

perceptions, abilities, peer pressure, parental expectations, and parents' social class, together with pragmatic considerations, as reasons for individuals to further their studies beyond compulsory schooling. Fevre *et al.* (1999) discuss Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' in relation to the career decisions taken by young people. These decisions, and by stretching the concept to the choice of whether to continue education or not, are claimed to be influenced by young people's personal experiences, social structures, interaction with 'significant others' and their cultural milieu, rather than the crude rational maximizing behaviourist explanation offered by the human capital theory. A tracer study by the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE, 2016, p.26) seems to confirm the effects of students' habitus on choice at post-compulsory levels, with 78.8% of students who did not have at least one parent with an HE qualification completing their studies at vocational institutions.

Nylund *et al.* (2017) study the Swedish system and report that vocational upper secondary programmes focus on employability and workplace skills. Students following vocational courses are taught to be good workers at the service of the economy. While acknowledging that workplace knowledge ('horizontal knowledge') is important and is also a powerful form of knowledge, they criticise the lack of 'vertical knowledge', like source criticism and scientific thinking, and the narrow curricula in vocational courses. They point to a stark divide between VET and HE programmes in Sweden, with the content, including what is expected of students graduating from these programmes, geared to train 'obedient workers', and based on market relevance. Hippach-Schneider *et al.* (2017) note that in Germany, Austria and France, HE academic programmes are explicitly linked to economic needs, and include vocational 'elements' such as practice-oriented curricula, partnerships with industry and practical learning phases. They see the emphasis on the vocational as positive and believe that the strong emphasis on academic education at policy level risks directing students to an academic route, perceived to be the ideal pathway by society, instead of choosing a learning pathway that is more suitable to them. The assumption is that there necessarily is a big difference between what is labelled 'academic' and what is labelled 'vocational'. Hodge (2016) states that the Australian VET curriculum content is controlled by privileged groups, namely employers. Employers want workers with skills which match what industry needs. According to Hodge (2016) this neoliberal model of VET alienates educators, who are deprived of their agency, since they are expected to deliver pre-packaged content, decided on by others.

Another take on an alternative vision of vocational education is Mayo's (2014) discussion of Gramsci's vision of vocational education. In this conception of VET, workers' understanding of the production process is broader than that broached by the neoliberal model, with its emphasis on efficiency and competitiveness. Their understanding of the process prepares them to 'combat, amongst other things, the threat of alienation' which stems from the fragmented and efficient production process itself. Mayo's (2014) emphasis is somewhat different from that implied in the policies discussed here. Instead of an emphasis on 'learning to earn', or 'learning to work' to serve the needs of the market, students in the Gramscian conception of VET proposed by Mayo (2014) as an alternative to the narrow human capital approach, learn to engage critically with work. Mayo (2009) speaks of the prevalent, narrow and reductionist neoliberal conception of competence. He calls for a more holistic conception where people are allowed to develop their agency and gain control over their choices. The competences required by the market are only part of a broader range of competences, which include those required to participate effectively in society.

While neoliberal discourse in education, and more so in vocational education and training (VET), is sometimes deemed inevitable (Down *et al.*, 2019), some voices contend that in some aspects Malta is eschewing neoliberal models in education governance, such as the 'new public management' model (Spiteri, 2016). According to Spiteri (2016), state control of educational institutions through quality assurance processes is not market-based but puts the onus of ensuring quality in teaching and learning on the providers through their internal developmental processes, with external oversight aimed at improving these internal processes. The pervasive use of business and market terms to describe educational provision as a servant of the market still move the focus off education as preparation for life. Student voice is still ignored. Bringing to the fore student voice, rather than the 'voice' of the market and the economy, can provide a framework to interrupt the neoliberal narrative. Instead of 'listening' to the market, as the *National Vocational Education and Training Policy* (NVETP) (MCAST, 2015) and HE strategy (NCFHE, 2015) seem to do, issues around education could probably be better understood by listening to the voices of students (Down *et al.*, 2017).

While in this chapter the scene was set for this study, by discussing discourse in education policies, and discussing different perceptions of the aims of education, in the next chapter I will argue that Sen's (1992, 2001) capabilities approach can provide a framework through which the voice of students in vocational education can be considered and heard, and how it could be applied such that students are provided with the tools and intellectual skills to 'lead the life they have good reason to value'.

Chapter Three - The Capabilities Approach, the 'good life' and education

In the previous chapter, the historical, political and social context of my study, and the emphasis of policy on preparing students for work was examined. In this chapter I will explain the theoretical framework used in this study, namely Sen's (1992, 2001) capabilities approach, as an alternative to the human capital and neoliberal discourse. Starting with general overview of the capabilities approach, criticisms of the approach will be examined and the application of the capabilities approach to education and 'the good life' will be explained.

The capabilities approach

The capability or capabilities approach was developed by Amartya Sen to assess human wellbeing in developing countries. The main thrust of Sen's argument is that development should involve the expansion of people's real freedoms (Sen, 2001, p.3). The term 'real' is very important, since Sen (1984) argues that genuine freedom implies that a person is not forced to lead a particular type of life because of social, political or economic constraints. The view of freedom that Sen (2001, p.17) develops is one involving the processes that allow people agency and decision-making opportunities, and the actual and effective opportunities that people have in their social and personal contexts. It is the individual person who chooses what they have 'good reason to value', but to do that, the context in which they live must allow them to develop their agency to act. Sen (2001, p.18) defines freedoms in terms of 'capabilities' - the ability and freedom of people to live the kind of lives they value. Capabilities may be 'used' by people to convert their resources including economic, social and cultural capital into functionings. Valued functionings or 'beings and doings' or 'personal states' (*ibid.*, p.75) may include 'being free from avoidable disease', to the more complex 'being able to take part in the life of the community and having self-respect'. More simply, capabilities can also be described as the freedom to achieve various lifestyles (*ibid.*, p.75).

Sen's approach moves away from the focus on solely income, and from development as measured by economic metrics. Nor is it based, only, on the notion of 'rights'. He widens the field to include wellbeing, agency, and freedom as determinants of human fulfilment. Sen (2010, p.226) dispels the assumption that a developed economy leads inevitably to

wellbeing and ‘good and worthwhile lives’. The ‘means’ do not necessarily lead to desirable ends. He brings up the short life expectancy of inner-city African-Americans as an example, with ‘often a substantially lower…chance of reaching an advanced age’ than people in economically poorer Costa Rica, Jamaica and Sri Lanka, amongst others. Sen (2010, p.227) goes on to emphasise the necessity of supportive social structures, such as public healthcare, education, social cohesion, and harmony, for people to be able to live ‘good lives’.

Hart (2014, p.29) explains that simply having a right, maybe a right in law, does not necessarily mean having the capability or capacity to choose between different versions of ‘a good life’, or that functioning, the actual ‘being and doing’, will follow. Neither does having an aspiration necessarily translate into having the real and effective opportunities to achieve. The capabilities approach sees individuals, using their agency and real freedoms to lead the life they have reason to value. Although this promise of freedom is also present in neoliberal discourse, the emphasis there is on negative freedom, that is freedom from the state, and the freedom to accumulate resources even if at the expense of everyone else. Sen’s freedoms, as expressed by the development of capabilities and the ability to convert those into valued ‘beings and doings’ or functionings, requires enabling and empowering social structures and public policy. He highlights the importance of the state, the community, social and democratic structures and processes, which guarantee people the ability to expand their capabilities and give them the agency to participate in economic, social and political actions (Sen, 2001, p.18).

Peppin Vaughan and Walker (2012) also insist that public policy ‘should aim to expand individual capability sets’. Examples of government interventions which promote capability formation include goods and services such as hospitals, accessible childcare, transport and schools, and the social context created in the country such as media images and legal rights related to women as workers, and scientists or engineers. Government, social and institutional support, in terms of services, policies and rights are essential for capability formation. According to Hart (2014, p.19) capabilities are life goals which are achievable by individuals in the community in which they live. This is not to say that there must not be a set of legal rights in the first place, but the capability approach examines whether these legal rights are in fact applied and accessible to people’s lives. If a right to education, for example, is enshrined in a country’s laws but schools are inaccessible to some students, or are difficult to reach by public transport, then the right to education

exists on paper but individual students do not have the capability to be educated.

Utilitarians focus on mental satisfaction, libertarians focus on the processes for liberty whatever the social consequences, while a capabilities perspective focuses on substantive freedoms that members of society enjoy (Sen, 2001, p.19). Equality in the capabilities approach becomes equity: different people have different needs, different resources and different opportunities to act in society to achieve valued functionings, their preferred 'beings and doings'. Sen (1992, pp.19-20) asserts the centrality of context when discussing equality. The ability to convert resources, including income varies because of the different opportunities that societies and communities offer. People are different in many ways including different personal characteristics and living in different environments. Different people also start their life at different starting points, with 'different endowments of inherited wealth and liabilities' (*ibid.*, p.20). Rather than assuming that choice is a neutral concept dependent solely or mostly on the individual, Sen (2001, pp.70-71) explains five kinds of interpersonal variations that advantage or disadvantage individuals, even those with equivalent incomes. Personal heterogeneities, environmental diversities, variations in social climate, differences in relational perspectives and distribution within the family all effect an individual's agency and real and effective freedoms. Personal and physical characteristics which might disadvantage an individual include disabilities, gender, age and illness. An individual needing more time and resources to learn a particular skill, whether at school or at work, will be at a disadvantage compared to their colleague, even if their income or access to resources are similar. Environmental differences, such as colder climates might disadvantage people who would otherwise be better off in warmer ones. The social politics - whether good educational facilities are provided, the existence or not of an effective social security system and a national health service accessible to all, whether a town or city is polluted, and the nature of community relations may also effect the real freedom of an individual to convert resources into a good life. The fifth aspect advantaging or disadvantaging individuals includes how and who controls how resources, including how opportunities are distributed in the family. Are girls encouraged to continue their studies like the boys in the family are? Are members of the family pushed into certain gendered roles, which they have no real opportunity to refuse? Who controls the distribution of family income? Sen's (1992, p.38) conception rests on looking at the choices that persons really and truly have. A person's wellbeing is evaluated through the capabilities a person has to achieve desired functionings, or 'beings and doings' (*ibid.*, p.39), and the processes through which valued functionings are achieved (*ibid.*, p.50).

Figure 3.1 below shows the relationships between various concepts in the capabilities approach: the resources, including social and political norms and public policy, available to the individual, which resources may affect that individual's agency. Conversion factors may enable or hamper the conversion of a person's resources, for example education, into capabilities. If state schools are freely available but some students need to work to support their family, then the conversion factor of students' social and economic conditions hampers the development of the capability to be educated. Students may adapt their preferences and fail to exercise their agency freedom. The social and political conditions may also enable or hamper the conversion of capabilities into functionings. Again, if an individual has the capability for valued work but valued work is not available then that person cannot convert that capability into a functioning. Agency achievement is the achievement of a valued goal, even if that goal is not conducive to a person's wellbeing. An example could be a person who values taking political action, but on taking that action that person faces discrimination. The person has exercised agency, but their wellbeing did not improve.

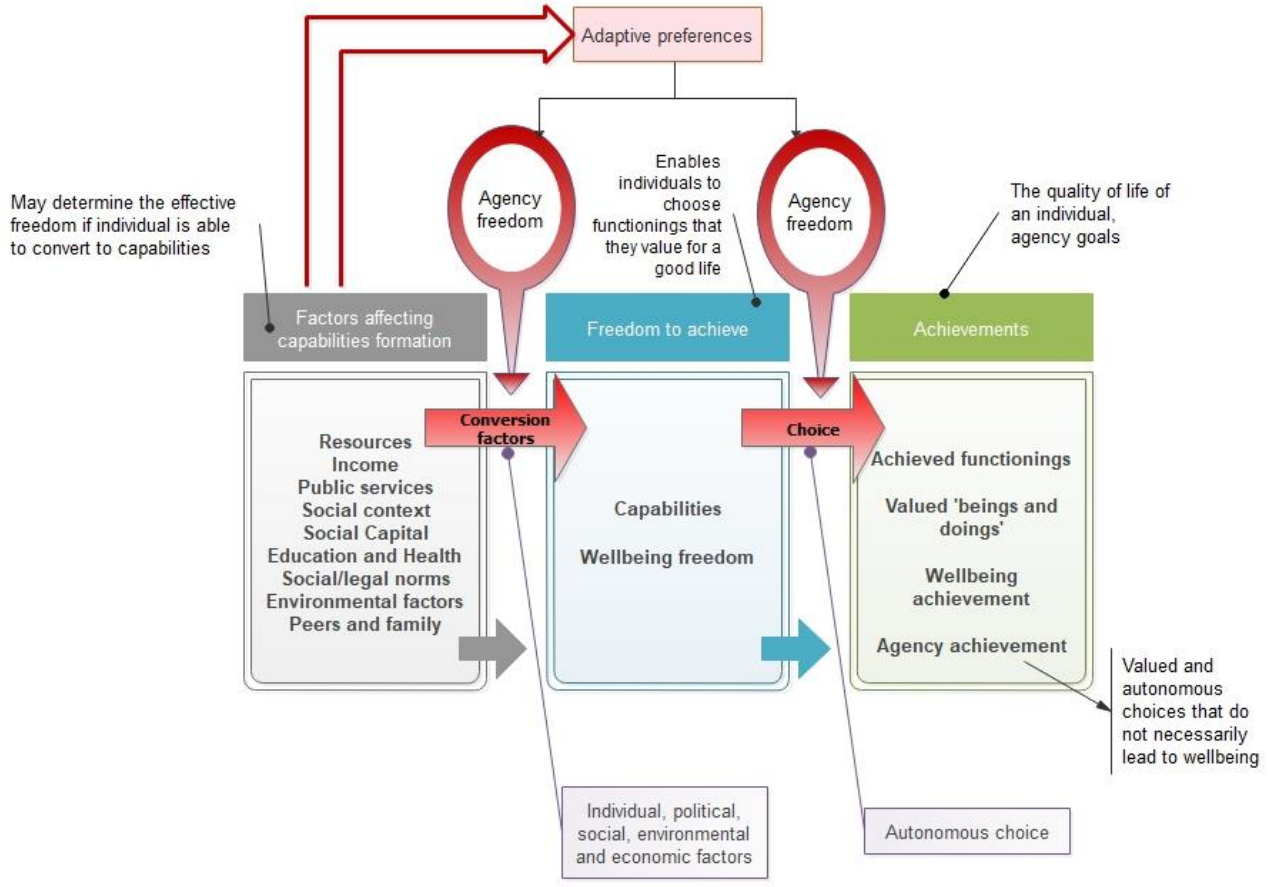

Figure 3.1 – An overview of the concepts of the capabilities approach (Sen, 2001; Robeyns, 2005).

A somewhat different notion of the capabilities approach was developed by Nussbaum. Nussbaum's (2003) work on the capabilities approach sees capabilities as the effective human rights and most basic freedoms which according to her are needed for a person to live a fulfilled life. She is more specific than Sen and lists ten basic capabilities 'as a basis for the idea of fundamental entitlements and constitutional law' which she deems as essential for people to be able to lead and choose the functionings to achieve wellbeing (Nussbaum, 2011, p.70). Her capabilities approach highlights 'the protection of areas of freedom so central that their removal makes a life not worthy of human dignity' (*ibid.*, p.31). Nussbaum's ten central capabilities are: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's political and material environment (*ibid.*, pp. 33-34). Nussbaum's version of the capabilities approach also takes each person as an end, with the focus on the opportunities available at the level of the individual – 'what is each person able to do or be?' (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 18). Nussbaum focuses on social justice and adds the notions of human dignity, a threshold of capabilities, and political liberalism to the approach (*ibid.*, p. 19). While Sen, with his aversion to lists, mostly compares different capabilities available to people in different societies, Nussbaum does not hesitate to list the capabilities which she sees as necessary for social justice and a liberal democracy. The effects of the societies in which people live are also acknowledged by Nussbaum. For her, capabilities are not just abilities residing inside a person, but also the freedoms created by personal abilities together with the political, social and economic environment (*ibid.*, p.20).

While Nussbaum's (2000, pp.83-84) definitions of capabilities differ from Sen's, the definition of functionings as 'beings and doings' seems to be substantially the same. She, however, avoids the terms wellbeing and agency, which concepts she deems unnecessary to her approach (*ibid.*, p.14). She subsumes these concepts in her definitions of different types of capabilities. She defines three types of capabilities - other than the ten central 'human rights'-type capabilities: Basic capabilities, Internal capabilities and Combined capabilities (*ibid.*, pp.83-84). Basic capabilities are innate and rudimentary, such as a newborn's capability for speech, love and gratitude. Internal capabilities are 'mature conditions of readiness' (*ibid.*, p.83) which develop only with support of the surrounding environment. Sen separates 'capabilities' from the concepts of agency, freedom and achievement, and conversion factors which depend on environmental, physical and economic factors. What Sen calls substantive freedoms – the real opportunities to convert

capabilities into valued functionings, Nussbaum labels Combined capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011, p.21). Education, together with social support for good physical and emotional health and for family care and love, support the development of Internal capabilities (*ibid.*, p.21). A society might produce internal capabilities (through education, healthcare etc.) but deny people the opportunities to function in accordance with those capabilities – for example people are educated so that they are capable of free speech but in practice freedom of speech is repressed (*ibid.*, p.21), and as such Nussbaum emphasises the importance of real freedoms – or Combined capabilities.

Combined capabilities are Internal capabilities combined with suitable external conditions for the exercise of a function (Nussbaum, 2000, p.84). The subsuming of agency and external factors in Nussbaum's version into 'Combined capabilities' may make the application of the concept of capabilities easier, but may also mean that agency or particular external factors are not given due importance. An individual may be so determined to achieve a particular capability or functioning that even adverse external factors may not be a hindrance to wellbeing, freedom and achievement. This nexus between agency and capability formation may need to be considered in depth.

In Sen's version once a capability is developed, once a person has the agency to be able to expand and develop capabilities then the functioning or wellbeing achievement is solely up to them and at their discretion. Countering the charge of ignoring the process of public reasoning in which people have the right to decide for themselves what they value and not have lists of capabilities imposed on them, Nussbaum (2011, pp. 63-64) insists that her approach, while necessary to ensure a threshold of a good life will leave many matters optional and open to deliberation. She cites the nation as the political structure which 'is responsible for distributing to all citizens an adequate threshold amount of all entitlements' (*ibid.*).

Despite differences there are lots of similarities between the Sen and Nussbaum approaches. The most obvious difference is Sen's resistance to definite and fixed lists of central capabilities; and, Nussbaum's commitment to a threshold of capabilities for a dignified life. These differences are not irreconcilable. Both different 'flavours' of the approach allow for considerable flexibility in choosing the important capabilities and functionings depending on the context in which the approach is being used. It is pertinent to point out that Sen (2004) is not against the listing of capabilities, but against a fixed and

final list of capabilities.

In an attempt to make the operationalization of the capabilities approach more straightforward and systematic Robeyns (2017, p.37) proposes a modular view of the capabilities approach. She proposes three different types of 'modules' to consider when operationalizing the approach: the A-modules, compulsory for all 'capability theories', B-modules consisting of non-optional modules with optional content, and C-modules which are either contingent on a particular choice made in a B-module or fully optional. The A-modules (*ibid.*, p.38) consist of functionings and capabilities as 'value-neutral' categories and as the evaluative space; conversion factors; valuing each person as an end; and a distinction between means and ends. The B-modules, in Robeyns's model (*ibid.*, p.60) define the purpose of the capability theory; the selection of dimensions to be studied; an account of human diversity and of agency; and an account of structural constraints. The B-modules also deal with the choice of measuring functionings, capabilities, or both and 'meta-theoretical commitments'. Robeyns's (2017, p.68) contingent C-modules, include other explanatory theories which may be used to interpret data, and methods of analysis and measurement. The supposed 'value neutrality' proposed by Robeyns (2017) relates to the valued choices people make. This concept of neutrality may be difficult to sustain in discussing capabilities developed through a quality education. Walker (2010; 2012a) and others, such as Giroux (2015) and Freire (2000) move away from the narrow human capital conceptualisation of education, including that of scientific and technical education (Walker, 2015). Capabilities in and through education are not neutral, they should enhance the real freedoms and opportunities of students.

The 'good life'

The notion of the 'good life', or being able to do what one values, is also tackled by Young (2011) and Freire (2000). The 'good life' envisaged by Young (2011, p.37) is in some ways analogous to both Sen's (2001, pp.41-42) and Nussbaum's (2000, p.84) conceptualisations. It is constrained by structures which may inhibit the development of agency. Since it is informed by critical theory, Young's discussion focuses on social structures which inhibit or constrain agency and freedom. Young (2011, p.5) sees the 'good life' as the opportunity to develop and exercise 'capacities' and expressing one's experience together with the agency to, with others, participate in determining 'one's actions and the conditions of one's action'. Again, context is emphasised, rejecting 'as

illusory the effort to construct a universal normative system insulated from a particular society' with its specific historical circumstances and particular political contexts. Freire (2000, p.74) describes oppression as being part of the social structure but 'being for others'. The oppressors demand that the oppressed adapt to the system, becoming complicit in their own oppression. While Freire wrote in a context of extreme oppression and colonial domination in the African and American continents, and from experience of the Brazilian military dictatorship (Freire, 2000; Freire, 2016b), his concepts of systemic constraints on people choosing their own version of the 'good life' is still pertinent. Young's (2011, pp.37-38) explains oppression as the systemic constraints which prevent people from learning and using 'expansive skills in socially recognised settings', and emphasises the importance of people being able to participate fully in society. Domination, in Young's view is manifested in institutional conditions which prevent people from participating in determining their own actions and the conditions of their actions. 'Others' determine what the 'actions' should be. The systemic influences on people's agency, and their ability to lead a life they have good reason to value is examined by Deneulin (2008, p.119). She places agency development in a dependent relationship with the way society is structured and its norms, which form over time, and speaks of 'a deep entanglement between choices and structures' (*ibid.*, p.116). An example (*ibid.*, p.116) is the capability to move around in a particular society which depends upon the presence, availability and accessibility of public transport, and a road infrastructure, but also on 'a degree of peace' which makes traveling safe. The 'good' of moving around freely can only be converted into a capability, the real and effective freedom to travel, if the conversion factors are present, if a person has the agency freedom to convert goods into capabilities. If the neighbourhood is not safe, there is no 'capability to move around', let alone the functioning or actual achievement of doing so.

Too individualistic?

Criticisms of the capability approach suggest that the approach is overly individualistic (Gasper and van Staveren, 2003; Stewart, 2005), however, as discussed earlier, Sen often refers to the individual as a member of society, which may enable or constrain real freedoms, and stifle or enable economic, social and political participation. It is quite clear that Sen sees individual wellbeing as being able to participate fully in society, and influence the direction of public policy (Sen, 2001, p.19). Walker (2005) refutes the criticism that Sen's approach is individualist in the neoliberal sense. The approach insists

on the centrality of the voices and actual freedoms of individuals in evaluating capabilities rather than some sort of aggregate, and thus avoids limiting a person's agency and wellbeing to serve the interests of others. Walker (2005) contends that in Sen's approach, individual freedom and agency strengthens social life. The neoliberal conceptualisation of freedom, agency and choice, on the other hand 'is driven by selfish self-interest' (*ibid.*). The wellbeing of the person in the capabilities approach is an end and not a means. In the human capital theory and neoliberal conceptualisation of society, people are rewarded for their own financial investment in themselves (Friedman, 2002, p.88), which investment presumably leads to higher incomes. The blame of failures to achieve the desired 'good life' rests solely with the individual. The individual is a means to achieve the end of a competitive, free and unrestrained market. Ironically, although neoliberalism insists on individual freedoms, these 'freedoms' serve the interests of the markets, and not the wellbeing of each and every individual. The neoliberal assumption that individuals are free agents contrasts sharply with Sen's notions of conversion factors, societal contexts and effective and real freedoms through which a person can flourish. Qizilbash (2014) concludes that the capabilities approach does not promote individualism 'in an objectionable way'. He states that the approach views individuals as interdependent and whose wellbeing and 'good life' are realised and depend on the society in which they are embedded.

In development studies, the capabilities approach has been applied to whole societies. By using the concept of capabilities as the ability or freedom to do things that a person has reason to value, and applying it to the development in Costa Rica, Deneulin (2008, p.105) explains that this is 'assessed in terms of what Costa Ricans are able to do or be, such as being able to read and write, to live in a clean environment, to live long and healthy lives, or to participate in the life of the community'. Although the focus of the approach is on individual flourishing, she (*ibid.*, p.106) points out that Sen's capability approach does not separate the 'thoughts, choices and actions' of individual human beings from the society in which they live and asserts that certain capabilities are socially dependent. Deneulin (2008, p.107) explains that there is a two-way relationship between social arrangements, including economic, social and political opportunities, and the use of individual freedoms. Capabilities cannot develop without institutions, from the market, to public services, the media, political parties and the judiciary (*ibid.*, p.107). Deneulin (2008, p.110) makes a strong case for the necessity of empowering and enabling social structures that enable individuals to develop individual capabilities. Social goods cannot exist without

individuals, they exist through individual actions and decisions. An example is a football match. A team cannot win, not even play, without the participation of its constitutive elements, its players. The match cannot be reduced to the actions of its players, the value of whole is greater than the value of the actions of its individual members taken separately (*ibid.*, p.110). It is a society and its structures which can make possible, or constrain, the development and expansion of individual capabilities (*ibid.*, p.113). Deneulin (2008, p.114) contends that the reasons why individual Costa Ricans enjoy high levels of human freedoms cannot be explained by excessive focus on individual lives but by examining 'structures of living together' which help individuals to flourish. Collective capabilities are just as important because they constitute, in part, the conditions of existence of individual capabilities. The role of the community and society in personal fulfilment and in well-being is similar to arguments made by Halpern (2005). Halpern (2005, p.70) argues that social capital, that is access to social networks which facilitates individual and collective action (*ibid.*, p.4), is good for the economy. He also posits that social connections such as relationships and friendships contribute to wellbeing (*ibid.*, pp.79-80).

Adaptive preferences

A person may fail to develop a capability set which enables them to live the life they have good reason to value. The capabilities approach means that a person should have multiple alternatives at their disposal and is able to choose freely from these alternatives. To make this choice a person has to first have the ability or freedom to consider all different alternatives, then the ability or freedom to put those choices into practice as functionings. However, the ability to inspect all different options and the ability to put choices into practice may be constrained by 'adaptive preferences' (Shäfer and Otto, 2014, p.9). According to Shäfer and Otto (2014, p.9) the capabilities approach 'has yet to conceptualise the process of socialisation', that is how people are prone to 'taking pleasure in small mercies and… cut down personal desires to modest 'realistic' proportions' (Sen, 1992, p.55). Sen (2010, pp.226-227) writes about the effect of society and the availability of public services, on constraining capabilities formation. His view of how society constrains freedoms and democratic processes is clear, he recognises the possible effects of adaptive preferences in inhibiting the expansion of capabilities, and following from that inhibiting achieved functionings, the 'beings and doings' that a person has good reason to value. The capabilities approach cannot be operationalised without an evaluation of the social structures and personal contexts which constrain wellbeing freedom and agency.

Bozzato (2014, pp.36-37) lists three ways in which social context influences capabilities formation, namely: its influence through individual conversion factors, that is personal, social and environmental factors; direct influence on the capability set; and social context and public debates, for example on matters of public policy which influence the definition of capability sets.

The capabilities approach and education

The capabilities approach can inform educational practice and policies, pedagogies and processes in educational institutions which aim to put students' wellbeing at the centre of action, pedagogical practice and policy making. It is an alternative to an approach based on the market. Robeyns (2006) describes three models of education, one based on human capital, another on rights and another on capabilities. The human capital model according to Robeyns (2006) is 'economistic, fragmented and exclusively instrumentalistic' with the benefits of education described only in terms of increased productivity and higher income. The rights model, according to her (*ibid.*) is the conceptual antipole of the human capital model. People whose economic productivity will probably not benefit from education still have a right to access education. Robeyns (2006) posits that the problem with this model is that although the right to education may exist on paper, in practice the provision of education may be lacking or problematic. Another issue is the risk of reducing rights to legal rights only, without taking into consideration how people may effectively access those rights. The capabilities model on the other hand values education intrinsically, irrespective of whether it also has some instrumental value. Walker (2008) states that rights-based approaches do not go into the process through which rights are secured. Rather than skills and competences and a focus on outcomes, an education informed by the capabilities approach has broader goals leading to more fully formed individuals as its aim. Robeyns (2006), however, laments the underspecified nature of the capabilities approach and says that additional social theories related to the topic being analysed are needed to operationalise the approach. Although Sen does not list theories or methods which may be used to analyse the effects of education on capabilities formation, his writings still point to a view of education as empowering, as intrinsically valuable and as essential for wellbeing and human flourishing (Sen, 2001, p.41). Surely neoliberal and human capital ideas sit uncomfortably with these concepts? 'Human development', with the emphasis on human flourishing rather than 'capital' or 'productivity', is somewhat removed from the market, and the productivity focused human capital model of education.

Unterhalter (2009, p.212) contends that human capital theorists are generally not interested in curriculum content, the process of teaching, the culture of the school, the social lives of students and teachers, and the inequalities and socioeconomic backgrounds of learners. Unterhalter (2009, p.207) contrasts the purely instrumental aim of education in the human capital theory, wherein education leads to economic growth, with the aims of education in human development and the capabilities approach. Education here is seen as fulfilling three roles: instrumental, empowering and redistributive. Education nurtures critical reflection and has crucial links with a healthy democracy. It is also empowering, in the sense that without education people may be constrained to find menial jobs that are not fulfilling, with society looking down on those who perform these jobs (*ibid.*, p.208). Unterhalter (2009, p.208) insists that education is central to human flourishing and is essential if individuals are to acquire valuable capabilities.

The value of the economy in the human development and capabilities approach is in its capacity to provide opportunities for each human being to have a life they have 'good reason to choose and value' (Unterhalter, 2009, p.212). Walker (2010) makes a bolder statement still, arguing that since the neoliberal or capitalist system focuses on the needs of the market and maintains inequalities which may hold students from flourishing, hindering their capability formation, the capabilities approach applied to education is 'normatively anti-capitalist' (*ibid.*, p.899). Walker (2010) argues for a critical pedagogy in HE, which fosters capability formation in students. The themes of agency and wellbeing being central to both critical pedagogy and the capability approach, Walker (2010) proposes that capabilities, the real opportunities that students value, can be developed through critical pedagogy, which overcomes the constraints posed by society and obstacles such as lack of cultural capital. She points to Sen's discourse on deep connections between social arrangements and individual flourishing (*ibid.*), to justify her proposed marriage between a critical pedagogy and the capabilities approach. Walker insists that the purpose of education from both perspectives is the enabling of students' flourishing and empowering them to challenge and overcome structures and systemic constraints which hinder social justice and human development. According to Walker (2012a) human capabilities offer an expansive language for education, proposing that ideas from Sen, Nussbaum, Dewey and Freire can be used to envision capabilities friendly pedagogies in contrast to a narrow human capital pedagogy. Critical pedagogy gives further insight into the structures and systemic constraints to the development of individual capabilities. Freire (2016b, p.34), for

example, observed that whereas polytechnic institutes in Guinea-Bissau should train technicians in different technical fields, 'the training will be broad enough to avoid turning them into technocrats'. His vision of technical education eschewed a narrow specialization which alienated students from everything else.

Lamenting the subsuming of education to the needs of the market, Giroux (2015, pp.1-2) refers to an era in the United States before the hegemonic spread of market values and neoliberal 'common sense', when education prepared students to become critical agents, with a voice to participate meaningfully in society. He mentions teaching to the test and memory work, with students rendered vessels into which teachers pour prescribed facts and knowledge. This recalls the Freirian concept of banking education (Freire, 2000, p.73), through which students are trained to conform to the needs of the economy. Giroux (2015, pp.6-7, p.10) lists what can be termed capabilities which students should develop through education: 'creating citizens equipped to exercise their freedoms'; learning 'competencies' to challenge the *status quo*, with teachers relating their teaching to social issues, discussing social problems, and fostering debate and dialogue; and developing reason, understanding, dialogue and critical engagement. These aims of Giroux's critical education resonate with the capabilities which emerge from research into student capabilities in Higher Education by Walker (2006) and Hart (2018). The expansion of capabilities through the development of agency is a central purpose of education according to Sen (2001, p.197). Sen uses the example of the empowerment of women and the development of their agency through education. The neoliberal conception of education hampers agency formation, with the interests of students situated in their communities ignored in favour of the imperatives of the economy and the market, implemented through curricula based on learning outcomes.

Vandekinderen *et al.* (2018) criticise the outcomes-based approach in education, which is based on the human capital model. A focus on capabilities means that the social processes through which young people's aspirations develop have to be considered. A person's aspirations and capabilities are shaped by the person's interactions with others and their environments. Opportunities, constraints, institutional structures, external resources, and human aspirations and achievements, are all linked together. The importance of access to knowledge for students to be able to be free to choose the life they have good reason to value is emphasised by Glassman and Patton (2014). In reviewing the works of Sen, Freire and Dewey they write that these thinkers acknowledge that information expands freedom of choice in life. Free choices are made if access to them are not limited by oppressive

structures deciding who gets access to what. According to Glassman and Patton (2014) Dewey's conceptualisation of skill sets is similar to Sen's concept of functionings, the beings and doings of everyday life. Freire, in their opinion takes a broader politically oriented perspective, arguing that individuals have access to the knowledge which dominant groups want them to have and live within. Glassman and Patton (2014) propose that the theories of Dewey and Freire on education offer pedagogies for expanding capabilities. They posit that limiting information limits capability expansion. They seem to be referring to 'powerful knowledge', or in their own words 'information [which] must be transformed into a knowledge of possibilities' (*ibid.*, p.1364). Dewey and Freire also anticipate Sen as proponents of a democratic form of education, that is, the process and pedagogy to expand students' freedoms, eschewing social reproduction. Dewey and Freire, similarly to Sen, are aware of the individual, social and environmental factors that affect effective education, that is, the expansion of freedoms or to use Sen's term, capabilities. Glassman and Patton (2014) contend that 'oppressed populations…become capable of questioning dictated capabilities' when they realize that the oppressors control sources of information. 'Dictated capabilities' may be a contradiction in terms given the centrality of agency freedom and agency achievement in the capabilities approach. 'Adaptive preferences' or even 'forced preferences' may explain the process better. Freire (2016a, p.6) insists that 'the state should neither be an almighty entity nor a lackey that obeys the orders of those who live well'. He refutes education as adaptation to an imposed social order by the powerful and rails against erstwhile progressive intellectuals who serve the dominant order by rejecting a pedagogy that empowers students and exposes 'the dominant ideology' as 'reducing education to mere transference of contents that are considered 'sufficient' to guarantee a happy life' (*ibid.*, p.9). For Freire, education is transformative and not an adaptation to the world 'without anger, without protests and without dreams of transformation' (*ibid.*, p.9). He explains how rather than changing structures 'the oppressors' prefer and lead the oppressed to adapt to the situation, making them more easily dominated (Freire, 2000, p.74). A 'banking education' in which the 'approved knowledge' is transmitted to students preserves the status quo and leads to passive students (Freire, 2000, p.75). The capacity to make choices, in Sen's parlance, agency and wellbeing freedom and achievements, makes the transformation of reality possible. However, if this freedom is lost, a person is no longer integrated with one's context but becomes subjected to the choice of others and becomes 'adapted' (Freire, 2013, p.4). For Freire (2000, p.81), when education is 'the practice of freedom' students are 'co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher'. In contrast to 'education as the practice of

domination', it eschews the framing of students as 'abstract, isolated, independent and unattached to the world'. While Freire writes about teaching illiterate and disenfranchised people in Latin America, which seem a world apart from students in EU countries, such as Malta in the twenty-first century, Shaull (2000, p.33) claims that Freire is still relevant to 'advanced technological society'. In his view people are being commodified, turned into objects rather than subjects; in the process they conform to 'the logic of the system', with young people 'from kindergarten to university' losing their voice and control over their life trajectories and on their vision of a 'good life' (*ibid.*, p.34). Dewey also refers to 'adaptive preferences' and focuses on processes that teach individuals to 'reach for new information and use it as a force for new capabilities in their lives', referring to the need to overcome what Dewey feared to be 'a natural inclination of humans to become dependent on habit' (Glassman and Patton, 2014). Dewey (2008a) writes of a form of education as oppression, 'an instrument of perpetuating unchanged the existing industrial order of society' (*ibid.*, p.326), and calls for a transformative education, not narrow vocational or trade training. He calls for an education which 'acknowledges the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation' (*ibid.*, p.328), which includes a wider array of subject matter from the 'historical background of present conditions', to Science, that is theoretical knowledge underpinning the vocation, to Economics, Civics and Politics. Dewey sees education as enabling and students as participants in a democratic society.

Dewey (2008a, p.90) warns of an education which reproduces oppressive structures where some are educated into masters, while others are educated into slaves - 'a privileged and a subject-class'. Walker (2012b) also broaches the issue of who exercises power on what students learn and the type of educational provision. Curriculum content, according to her, is decided by powerful groups, who decide what students should learn, which in turn shapes their identities and promotes their perspective on what version of the good life is desirable. In Walker's (2012b) view, the prevailing policy stance is geared to educate students 'to be economic producers, consumer-citizens, and entrepreneurial selves'. On the other hand, a capabilities approach would aim to nurture, not just at school or at institutional level, but as public policy, the political, social, economic and education conditions that 'enable individuals to take informed decisions, based on what they have reason to value'. In contrast to a human capital inspired education, Glassman and Patton (2014) contend that capability based education is not meant to be 'measurable' - as in described by simplistically measurable outcomes, but should guide students to solve their own problems through participatory democratic processes, going beyond skills. 'Students

need to perceive that they have more choice in their life trajectories; skills are learned in context' (Glassman and Patton, 2014).

Capabilities through education

In assessing whether students in Higher Education (HE) are given opportunities to flourish, Wilson-Strydom and Walker (2017, p.226) invite us to ask whether there exist the necessary conditions which enable students to develop their agency and capabilities. They mention pedagogic practices and micro-level classroom and pedagogical relationships between lecturers and students which might enable or constrain human development. Walker (2006) discusses lists of capabilities which HE students should develop. She argues (*ibid*. p.49) that HE communities should produce their 'flexible, revisable and general list' of capabilities as a guide to an education which develops valuable capabilities and agency. Harreveld (2008) sees education as a process through which both economic and social outcomes are transformed. Using the capabilities approach, she suggests a range of services for Australian young adults, in an education that is not only job-oriented but also life-oriented. The services, rather than just teaching content which students are expected to absorb, enable young adults to develop capabilities, which otherwise would not develop because of various constraints. The services suggested are youth support services; long term socio-academic learning services; networking to power through mentoring; and work readiness training. An aspect of services offered by schools, colleges and universities is career guidance. The capabilities approach was used by Robertson (2015) to frame this career focused service as an empowering process, with education promoting economic development rather than following from it. People are the 'end' for economic activity and not just the means to an end. He lists 'career capabilities', namely: agency capabilities (self-efficacy; pro-activity; use of support and advocacy; self-advocacy and 'voice'; a context of facilitation and empowerment); life-career management capabilities (a vision of potential future functionings; hope and optimism; goal setting; decision making and life planning; transition skills); work and learning capabilities (cultural capability – habits of language, behaviour, manners and shared knowledge that allow an individual to operate within a particular social environment; symbols of capability – qualifications, titles, memberships; generic work and study capability – literacy, computer skills, self-presentation, team work, punctuality; vocationally specific capability – knowledge, skills, and attitudes specific to a particular job role, occupation or industry; learning capability –

study skills etc.); social capabilities (relationships with family, friends, colleagues, contacts providing support; social connectivity); economic capabilities (access to financial income, capital and liquidity which can be converted into resources for a particular functioning; access to group membership, fees, clothing, accommodation, equipment or transport); and health capabilities (mental and physical health; robustness to challenges).

Andresen *et al.* (2010, p.166) emphasise the importance of considering the particular biographies, plans and lifestyles and choices of individual students in designing an education based on the capabilities approach. Flores-Crespo (2007, p.45) proposes four 'dimensions' through which to assess the extent to which education contributes to the expansion of capabilities, namely, the effects of education on the development of agency, the pedagogical aspect - how empowering the process is, the effects of the structures of institutions, together with the policy aspect of education. Wood and Deprez (2012) see a capabilities inspired education as an education in which critical pedagogy is used to support students, making them aware of the power relations which favour some and constrain others in their pursuit of the good life. They mention the feminist notion of social categories which are constructed by the powerful, which categories influence identity formation and the possibilities, agency or freedom members of these categories actually possess. They see education's purpose as that of providing 'opportunities for students to develop critical, imaginative capacities to question the world as it is, while also envisioning new possibilities for themselves and for others within it.' While a human capital approach sees students as competing for position and resources, Wood and Deprez (2012) view an individual student's achievement in relation to their capabilities rather than as measured by the aggregate whole or against the 'best' student in the class. The context for human wellbeing is the group and the classroom, because as Freire (2000, p.81) explains, an education 'as the practice of freedom', which empowers students sees them as people attached to the world not atomistic, isolated and abstract individuals. In this sense the classroom promotes individual wellbeing by providing a space in which students feel emotionally safe in the process of learning. Students are able to hold on and affirm their identities, while being treated equitably as part of an authentically engaged learning community. Students' wellbeing means that they have real opportunities for choosing and enacting valued ways of 'beings and doings', and being able to ascertain whether each one's successful academic accomplishments align with their individual values. Learning for wellbeing means that their learning experiences help them to explore who they want to become and what they want to do in the future. It is an education which is not abstract but

anchored to lived experiences, enabling students to develop capabilities which empower them to live and act in the real world (Wood and Deprez, 2012).

An interesting application of the capabilities approach to medical education is made by Sandars and Hart (2015). The aim is to help medical students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to achieve their potential. The 'real world' features heavily in Sandars and Hart's (2015) application of the approach. Students are given the opportunity for personal and identity development in a 'community attachment' - 'a complex social system', away from the rigid, maybe artificial setting of the lecture room. Students are asked to list their personal and professional aspirations. Reflective discussions and tutor support are used to facilitate students in making learning their own and to help them engage with the curriculum. Without 'dramatic changes' to the medical curriculum they posit that the capabilities approach can be integrated with existing teaching, focusing it more on personal growth and the development and promotion of agency and social justice, making learning more meaningful in the process.

Although focused on very young students, a study by Cameron (2012) gives an insight into the applicability of the capabilities to different levels and forms of education. Cameron (2012) asked her British year 8 secondary school music students what they deemed are the most important opportunities that school and music lessons in particular should afford them. Students came up with the capabilities to engage practically with music and the capability to pursue a career in music in the future. More generally they mentioned that school should give them the opportunity to access knowledge which interested them, together with skills for employment and to further their studies at higher levels if they so wished. They attached importance to being able to build friendships and work with others. Using students' interests as a starting point and enabling practical engagement with the subject by introducing theory alongside practice, together with in-class activities rather than just lecturing come up as student engagement strategies in various studies (Zepke and Leach, 2010; Pusca and Northwood, 2015; Bukoye and Shegunshi, 2016).

Sugiono *et al.* (2018) emphasise making connections between homes, lives and classrooms to make knowledge more meaningful and develop students' knowledge and skills in the context of solving real-life issues. On considering students of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), Walker (2015) imagines a future in which pedagogies of technical subjects advance human wellbeing. According to Walker (2015)

educators need to deliberate on which capabilities and functionings are valuable for HE STEM students. Pedagogies and policies should then support the development of these capabilities. A capabilities approach based education would take into consideration the conversion factors which may enable or constrain student agency. The factors are personal, social and environmental. Walker (2015) provides examples of capabilities she deems important for STEM undergraduates: to study Engineering; to think critically; to read with understanding; to develop good academic arguments; to assist peers in their learning; to have access to work-based experiences; to develop career networks; to move about campus freely and safely; to have good friendships with diverse students and so on. For Walker (2015) a capabilities inspired Science and Engineering education is for rich human lives rather than for obtuse but technically proficient and knowledgeable professionals living in their own bubble and unconcerned about society and the lives of others. While vocational education is often conflated with preparation for work, Walker and Fongwa (2017, pp.223) propose capabilities for employability, avoiding narrow conceptions of education. These HE capabilities are: subject knowledge; critical thinking and autonomy; economic opportunities; affiliation; and 'thick aspirations'. The conversion factors to enable these capabilities would include the institutional structure of the university or college which students attend, the education system and what real opportunities it provides students and the social environment in which students live, including their families socioeconomic status.

Boni-Aristizábal and Calabuig-Tormo (2016) also make recommendations for a curriculum based on the capabilities approach. The capabilities approach cannot be decoupled from human development values. Robeyns (2017, pp.197-201), however, is of the opinion that the capabilities approach and human development should not be conflated for various reasons, including because most people, including policy makers, do not associate the term 'development' with improvements to the lives of people living in high-income countries. It is, in my opinion, quite difficult to imagine the capabilities approach devoid of these values, even if one would expect the ends promoted by the United Nations Programme for Development (UNDP, nd) to be in some respects quite basic to apply to developed countries[2].

[2] The Human Development Index measures average achievement in human development by assessing three dimensions: the health dimension through life expectancy at birth; the education dimension by measuring mean years of schooling for adults aged 25 and more, the expected years of schooling for children. The standard of living dimension is measured by gross national income per capita. It does not measure other aspects of wellbeing such as inequalities, poverty, human security and empowerment (UNDP, nd).

Boni-Aristizábal and Calabuig-Tormo (2016) propose that to promote capability expansion of students studying Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) at university and to promote both procedural and personal knowledge, universities should promote experiential learning spaces like community work, where students use their skills and knowledge in 'public-good' projects. Experiential internships should be accompanied by self-reflection and critical-thinking processes that help 'cultivate strong agency', with university teachers acting more as facilitators rather than transmitters of knowledge. While competences 'are functional, demand-oriented and, in present times, clearly related to the employability discourse', capabilities expand individuals' freedom and the ability to act to develop and achieve desired lifestyles. Through experiential learning and reflection students can envision 'what society should be', rather than just 'what society is'. While being employable is important, in that it opens doors and opportunities, and may provide the security to live a good life, the capabilities approach requires us to go beyond employability as the goal of HE. Graduates' involvement in social and political initiatives, and their personal development is a valued goal of education in the capabilities approach (*ibid.*). They quote the Bologna Process's *Leuven Communiqué* (European Commission, 2009, p.3): 'Student-centred learning requires empowering individual learners, new approaches to teaching and learning, effective support and guidance structures and a curriculum focused more clearly on the learner in all three cycles'.

Lonzano *et al.* (2012) in reiterating the development of freedom as the central aim of the educational process, again quote the *Leuven Communiqué* (European Commission, 2009) of Ministers of Higher Education, which seems to digress from the talk about skills and human capital speak, defining student-centred learning in HE as learning which empowers individuals. They suggest that this should lead to an understanding of pedagogy in the Socratic tradition of discussion, debate and participatory dialogue in which knowledge and values are constructed collectively - starting from the principles of equity, diversity, empathy, tolerance and solidarity - rather than a 'master class' with top-down transmission of knowledge.

Expansion of capabilities, that is, wellbeing and human flourishing, as the aims of education means that we must go beyond employability, despite its fundamental importance to students. Deprez and Wood (2013, p.146) set out what 'teaching for wellbeing' should entail. They warn that reducing HE to preparation for employment runs

the risk of students adapting their preferences of what they expect out of education to socially constructed expectations. Students need to be given the opportunity to discover connections between theory and ideas and actions and helped to develop real options or capabilities for what they want to be and do. Education should move away from rote learning and embrace multi-disciplinarity, applying learning to complex issues (*ibid.*, p.149). Drawing on ideas from democratic education, critical theory and pedagogy, and feminist theory and pedagogy, Deprez and Wood (2013, pp.151-153) propose 'commitments' necessary to implement a capabilities inspired educational pedagogy. They propose elements of the capabilities approach which they deem central to education, namely educating for human wellbeing, for reasoned values, for lives people actually can and do live, and education as a foundational capacity for agency and freedom. They suggest that human wellbeing can be advanced through an education that explores and provides experience in democratic and inclusive practices, and collaborative processes promoting student wellbeing. Other 'commitments' are facilitating critical reflection and exploration of power relations, dialogue and an interrogation of assumptions, issues of identity, and examining students' own and others' adaptive preferences.

Brighouse and Unterhalter (2010, loc.2939) argue that neither the primary goods approach, which measures the outcomes of education in terms of the costs of inputs, nor the capabilities approach, with its focus on human flourishing, are adequate to guide us on what the content and distribution of educational opportunities should be. They criticise the insensitivity of the primary goods approach to variations in people, something which the capabilities approach takes into consideration. Public deliberation, as required by Sen may also be problematic since imbalances of power might mean that minorities and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups, or who lack confidence will still remain unheard (*ibid.*, loc.2811). For a society in which a sense of justice is the basis for public and educational policy, teachers and parents should, according to Brighouse and Unterhalter (2010, loc.2832), develop children's capabilities for 'other-interestedness', self-control and 'scrutinizing evidence and argument'. School sometimes has to compensate for the lack of emotional and moral rearing at home. Writing about young children, whereas the authors suggest avoiding excessive paternalism in their education, they contend that the educator and even the policymaker may often be in a position to know better what paths the child should follow and the content the child should study. There are situations in which the educator 'has to make a choice about how to relate to, and how to direct, the child' (*ibid.*, loc.2853). Although difficult to determine what is in the best educational interest of a

student the educator, the administrator, or when it reaches up that far, the policymaker, have the obligation to consult the best judgment they can make concerning the child's future prospects for enjoying a flourishing life, ‘vague as that is’ (*ibid.*, loc.2859).

Brighouse and Unterhalter (2010, loc.2934-2940), marry aspects of the primary goods approach to the capabilities approach and propose the following factors as measures of how socially just education is:

- the conditions for free public discussion on the content and form of education for all social groups, taking into account historical and uneven contemporary patterns of public participation;
- the forms of governance in the country at all levels of government affecting education;
- the legal framework, resources, social contexts, knowledge and skills necessary for putting into practice the recommendations of public deliberation;
- processes through which individuals can express themselves and articulate the intrinsic value of education’;
- multidimensional measurements of inequality from levels of income and wealth, to aspects of identity relevant to forms of inequality like race, ethnicity, gender, and their intersections;
- income of teachers relative to the income of others in the country;
- measures of school input and output drawing on a primary goods metric;
- measures of resources necessary for adequate achievement from participation in the labour market and in the political system; and,
- effective participation in free public discussion.

Brighouse and Unterhalter (*ibid.*, loc.2885) tie what needs to be learnt to support students’

visions of a life one has reason to value to the context in which they live. In different societies students will need different skills. The instrumental value of education is dependent on resources, teachers, peer and family support. While the instrumental value is important, they (*ibid.*, loc.2890) posit that human flourishing, although difficult to measure, means that a person may 'have a more rewarding and complex mental life than she had before being educated', irrespective of education's instrumental value, mentioning enjoyment from reading literature, appreciating music, and 'an aptitude and enthusiasm for constructing model figures'. These, and other valued goals indicate agency and wellbeing achievement.

Capabilities developed through education, according to Terzi (2007) are literacy; numeracy; sociability; participation without shame; learning dispositions; physical activities; Science and Technology; and practical reason. Walker (2007, pp.189-190) lists capabilities deemed necessary for gender equality, namely autonomy; knowledge; social relations; respect and recognition; aspiration; voice; bodily integrity and health; emotions and emotional integrity; and developing agency, empowerment and autonomy. Nussbaum (1997) in *Cultivating Humanity* contends that capabilities developed through a 'liberal' American university education include critical self-examination, the ideal of the world citizen and the development of a narrative imagination, reiterating these three capabilities elsewhere, as necessary for a quality education (Nussbaum, 2006). These, however, according to Walker (2008) are not sufficient capabilities for explaining inequalities in the processes and outcomes of education. Nussbaum seems to focus on the education afforded to the already privileged who make it to expensive and prestigious American liberal-arts universities and colleges.

For Hart (2014) capabilities and pupil autonomy are assessed through perceptions of how they are treated in college and HE environments (*ibid.*, p.28). Capabilities are more than rights or aspirations (*ibid.*, p.19), they are life goals which are achievable by individuals in the community in which they live. In conversations with UK university students Walker (2006, p.87) says that it is the pedagogical context that enables students to develop their agency and the 'rationality' to make present and future choices and their valued identities. In her study *(ibid.*, p.87) students studying to become urban planners, valued being able to relate theory to practice; the social relations of learning; being able to understand things from different perspectives; recognising and understanding power relations and the process of deliberative democracy; acquiring professional knowledge to support the excluded and

marginalised in planning decision making; active participative and experiential learning; and knowledge for professional action in the world. Management students valued (*ibid.*, pp.82-83) critical knowledge; generating critical thought; respecting, recognising, valuing diversity and difference; reflective self-knowledge; participatory and active learning and having a voice which is heard and listened to; and being able to engage a plurality of views in dialogue and debate. While for History students (Walker, 2006, pp.78-79) critical understanding and ownership of knowledge and acting on this knowledge; a disposition to learn; exposure to a plurality of perspectives; social relations in the group and in relationship with the lecturer; recognition and respect from peers and the lecturer; imaginative empathy and emotional engagement with other lives, times and places; and being left to learn, that is, being self-directed and independent, but within a clear course structure and lecturer support, were valued.

Flores-Crespo (2007, p.51) maps seven functionings through which to evaluate capabilities of university graduates to Sen's and Nussbaum's instrumental freedoms and central capabilities respectively. These are being able to feel confidence and self-reliance; being able to visualise life plans; being able to develop further abilities; being able to transform commodities into valuable functionings; being able to acquire knowledge required in a job position; being able to look for and ask for better job opportunities; and being able to choose desired jobs. Applying the capabilities approach concept of agency and what individuals 'have good reason to value', Hannon *et al.* (2017) define 'educational capabilities' as the empowerment of low socioeconomic status students to choose an educational path that they value. They note that in Britain even if students from different socioeconomic groups have equivalent academic outcomes, they still do not have equal employment opportunities. They do not have the 'capital' to develop capabilities which depend on social and cultural capital advantages, private schooling and family networks. The conversion factors needed to convert resources into capabilities are lacking. They (*ibid.*) describe how mentors from similar communities as the students, provided experiential information to students, built a relation of trust with them and helped students develop different attitudes towards higher education. The capabilities considered important in education in the study of fourteen-year old Irish secondary school students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds include human agency and autonomy; hope and voice; and identity and knowledge. Autonomy is promoted through students organising and taking care of a project. This builds confidence and pride in students' work. Knowledge about future outcomes and mentoring relationships reassure students that they

can achieve their aspirations. Stereotypes of the 'identity' of people who continue into Higher Education as 'higher class' are challenged. The development of the capability to aspire means providing students with practical contexts in which they can develop agency to support their own educational decisions.

Tinwell (2013) brings up the possible dissonance between student expectations and what Higher Education (HE) courses really offer. She describes a half day workshop to help Further Education (FE) students' transition to an HE Games Art Bachelor's degree programme. The workshop also served to gauge student expectations, attitudes and aspirations. Tinwell (2013) reports that some students assumed they would just do practical tasks related to the subject area; their expectations of HE did not fit with the more academic view of HE as engaging with research and scholarship and developing a critical approach to the subject. It may reflect on the assumption that vocational or applied subjects should not require writing tasks and exercises such as producing literature reviews. The tension between the application of theory to practical work, the neglect of reading and academic literacy are mentioned as obstacles to the development of capabilities to succeed in their degree. She suggests contextualising coursework and emphasising the effect that research and development have on the industry in which the students want to be employed, together with a pedagogy that helps students from FE adjust to HE study, thereby situating the academic within the practical or vocational.

This raises the issue of how much agency students should have. While curricula based on industry and employer needs may not lead to developing the whole person as demanded by the capabilities approach, powerful knowledge may be essential if students are to flourish and participate fully in society. Giroux (2015, p.9) acknowledges the need to prepare students for work but insists on, echoing Dewey (2008a, p.328), a pedagogy which talks about work - about workplace inequalities, injustices, more democratic forms of work, freedom, equality and respect - rather than simply preparing students for work. Sen (1992, p.46) remains vague on which capabilites and functions are important for a person's wellbeing. The capabilities and functionings for an enriched life depend on the evaluation of the context. Different capability sets and functionings may be important, or trivial depending on the context (*ibid.*, p.44).

Education, employability and work

As discussed in Chapter Two, the issue of employability and education pervades policy. While criticising a narrow conception of education, Walker and Fongwa (2017) focus on the importance of employability to students in their book *Universities, Employability and Human Development.* They posit that the focus on employability need not derive from human capital theory. Employability, they contend, is still important for human development. Their discussion is set in the particular context of South Africa. Walker and Fongwa (2017, p.59) in applying the capabilities approach to the human development of university students also reiterate that individuals are 'located in society and connected to others', with the development of wellbeing dependent on social arrangements. Wellbeing is co-realisable (*ibid.i,* p.93). They list important capabilities, or the 'real opportunities', such as opportunities for advancing critical capacities and confidence to participate in class, which are important for student wellbeing (*ibid.,* p.59). Being educated is described as 'a foundational multiplier capability' (*ibid.,* p.60), enabling persons to flourish, instilling a love for knowledge and ideas and fostering democratic life, citizenship skills, public reasoning skills and enhancing economic opportunities. Education is described as fostering 'flourishing by developing capabilities and functionings so that people can actually succeed in being and doing what they value as agents of their own lives' (*ibid.,* p.60). Insisting on assessing capabilities, that is opportunities to achieve, rather than functionings, or actual achievements, Walker and Fongwa (2017, p.61) explain how functionings may obscure inequalities between students. By just assessing functionings, constraints and the availability of conversion factors and agency freedom are not taken into account. A student coming from an upper-middle class family and a working-class student may, for example both get a second-class degree, but it would have been the working-class student who had to make the most effort to get there. With the right help to expand her capability set, the working-class student may have achieved a first, had it not been for her circumstances. Nevertheless, actual functionings can also provide useful information (Walker and Fongwa, 2017, p.62); what a person achieves may help assess why and what made those achievements possible, shedding light on structures which actually promote achievement. Observing functionings in students could be a good indicator of quality in educational provision and outcomes at an educational institution (*ibid.*). Agency, they explain, is constrained, or promoted by the social, political, and economic opportunities available to students. For working-class students 'grit and determination in the face of hard

circumstances (at university) may not be enough to enable their success in the absence of capability-enhancing pedagogies, financial resources and other supportive educational arrangements' (*ibid.*, p.64). The capabilities approach allows an assessment of the effects of power and social structures and of environmental and economic conditions in education.

Students are justifiably preoccupied with what comes after they finish their studies. Walker and Fongwa (2017, p.55) quote the 2015 United Nations Human Development Report (UNDP, 2015), which underlines the importance of being employable as a fundamental driver for human development and wellbeing. Work is necessary for human flourishing and social wellbeing, and for peoples' identities and relationships. Walker and Fongwa (2017, p.55) see employability as enabling graduates to achieve their aspirations. Employability, according to them, should not be viewed in a reductionist manner, as preparing students to serve the market, as in human capital based policies. It can be subsumed to the idea of wellbeing and based on human development values such as empowerment, participation and sustainability. Quoting other sources, Walker and Fongwa (2017, p.56) argue that economic and human development can be pursued together in a 'virtuous circle'. Pursuing economic growth on its own leads to social inequalities, negatively affecting wellbeing and flourishing. Although as discussed earlier, Robeyns (2017, pp.197-198) insists that human development and the capabilities approach are not to be conflated, Walker and Fongwa (2017, p.58), see capability formation as human development, with human development requiring human capabilities.

Friedman (2002, p.100-101) sees vocational education, that is, education for a profession or skilled work, as an investment similar to investment in machinery and buildings, which should raise economic productivity. Students are assumed to rationally choose which post-compulsory courses to follow to extract the maximum benefit. The human capital model assumes that it is in the interest of countries, corporations and individuals to invest in education to increase economic growth, profits and income respectively (Regmi, 2015). Education becomes a site of preserving the *status quo* and the capitalist order by providing a disciplined, repressed workforce (Bowles and Gintis, 1975).

In Leßmann and Bonvin's (2011) view, the capability for work, that is work from a capabilities perspective, is necessarily 'valued work'. It is work which individuals have reason to value. Work from this perspective must be valued, otherwise it is not freedom-enhancing. The conversion factors necessary for the capability for work are resources such

as cash benefits; and personal and social conversion factors. Workers have no reason to value jobs, which although affording them decent remuneration, mean long hours at work, work intensification, and bad work conditions. Personal conversion factors include qualifications and technical know-how, together with the ability to work in teams, to communicate and the ability to balance demands from private and professional life. Transferable knowledge, technical know-how and competencies enhance a worker's capability for work. Social conversion factors include the quantity, accessibility and quality of available jobs. Job quality can be assessed by measuring the extent to which a job interferes with other aspects of a person's life, and by examining how a job contributes to human flourishing by considering the content of work such as skills, competencies, degree of autonomy and responsibility, and hourly productivity. Participation in decision-making, or at least the consideration of the views of workers in decisions also contributes to 'valued work'.

Forms of capital, education and employability

The concept of various forms of capital may also help explain the constraining or enabling of students' development of capabilities. Similar to Sen's (2001, pp.39-40) discourse on systemic structures which expand or constrain capability formation, a social capital perspective evaluates differences in social capital in terms of class differences, including the effect of social capital in educational and economic attainment. Social capital depends on networks and membership of social groups, which networks and groups provide support and open doors in an informal and non-institutionalised way. Bourdieu (1986) asserts, quite deterministically, that social capital is inherited, depending on one's family and socioeconomic background, such that all other forms of capital emanates from economic capital. Social capital can also be seen as a capability which can be converted in the right social conditions into valued functionings. Bourdieu sees capital accumulation as a constant competition between people to accumulate as much capital as possible to gain advantages and pursue their own interests (Siisiäinen, 2000). Sen's (2001, p.289) insistence on an inclusive and democratic process in deliberating capabilities, paints a different picture of society - that of cooperation rather than competition. Regmi (2015) describes a humanistic model of lifelong learning, which includes the building of social capital. According to this model lifelong learning should aim to develop active members of society, who engage in politics, collective decision making and collective action. He

describes the purpose of lifelong learning and education, according to the humanistic model, as strengthening cooperation, coordination and collaboration among members of a community. The enhancement of social capital is seen as benefitting all members of a society.

Another form of 'capital' according to Bourdieu (1986) is cultural capital. He describes cultural capital as 'long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body', access to cultural goods and educational qualifications. Bourdieu (1986) proposes that different types of capital describe the structure of the social world. The constraints or the power people with different types and 'amounts' of accumulated capital have, determine their chances of success. Importantly, he equates capital to power – that is the ability of persons to achieve what they want. People with accumulated social and cultural capital are able to achieve more. Ultimately all types of capital are fungible, they are all a form of power.

Social capital, like other forms of capital, is not equally distributed in society (Strathdee, 2003). The economically advantaged will seek to pass on that advantage to their children, through their networks and connections. Academic education is perceived as conferring more status, giving the holders of academic credentials a positional advantage over others. Maintaining separate tracks serves as a way for the advantaged to maintain that advantage and transfer it to their children. The discourse of individuals as free agents, free to choose and compete for jobs or for the qualifications, with 'the best' landing better jobs, has been dubbed as 'at worst fraudulent' by Avis (2017). It masks the effects of inequality on the real choices and possibilities of individuals from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Boliver (2015) reports large differences between long established universities and former polytechnics, the so called 'post-1992' universities in the UK in terms of resources, social mix and prestige. According to her, the differences with respect to teaching are, however, minor. Still degrees from the prestigious universities, serving more advantaged students, are perceived as better, even instrumentally and career-wise. Walker and Fongwa's (2017) insistence on employability, albeit from a capabilities point of view is pertinent because while advantaged students with the 'right' social and cultural capital can convert their credentials into employment opportunities, maybe even into 'work that matters for flourishing lives and social wellbeing' (*ibid.*, p.55), even by accessing more prestigious institutions, disadvantaged students may need the support of educational arrangements which 'enable the translation of employability into meaningful, decent work and fulfilling graduate careers' (*ibid.*, p.55).

In this chapter I discussed the theoretical framework and the concepts operationalised in this study. The capabilities approach is presented as an alternative to the human capital discourse prevalent in education policy and particularly vocational education policy. I set out how the approach shifts the focus from the needs of the economy to the needs of students; from what is deemed as good and desirable by policy, to what is deemed as 'the good life' more holistically. In the next chapter the methodology used to listen to student voice will be discussed, together with the operationalisation of the capabilities approach with a view to analysing their perceptions of what constitutes 'the good life'.

Chapter Four – Representing student voice

In the previous chapters I analysed policy documents and reports which are pertinent to my study on degree students at the Malta College of Arts Science and Technology (MCAST), a vocational college. I then went on to discuss and explain the theoretical framework of this study, which anchors my view of education as beyond the frame of the needs of the economy and human capital. I frame education, and more particularly, Higher Education (HE) in a vocational college, in terms of the capabilities approach; that is with the aim of expanding the capabilities or the real opportunities students have. Sen's (2001, p.288) capabilities approach insists that it is individuals only who can really choose what they value. It follows from this that the opinions and voice of students are central to my study. Agentic freedom does not necessarily enhance one's wellbeing, for example taking political action in some countires may lead to oppressive action by the state. In the context of education I will concentrate on wellbeing freedom, that is capability sets that contribute to human flourishing and the opportunities to achieve valued functionings and the 'good life'. I assume that a good education expands capabilities and hence wellbeing freedom. In this chapter I discuss my positionality as a researcher, my chosen methodology and student voice, my sampling strategy, ethical issues, and the coding process. The research strategy pursued was influenced by my theoretical framework, the capabilities approach, and designed to answer my research questions, namely:

Research Question 1 - What is the students' conception of the 'good life' and what do they have 'good reason to value' (Sen, 2001, pp.74-75)?

Research Question 2 - What opportunities do they feel education is offering them to develop their capabilities; or what constraints do they think they have in achieving their vision of the 'good life'?

Research Question 3 - What is the students' take on the prevalent human capital discourse on education? (MCAST, 2015). While the college emphasises 'preparation for work' – how do the students see themselves? How is their choice of subjects related to their vision of 'the good life'?

Methodology

An education inspired by the capabilities approach enables the expansion of students' capabilities, gives them opportunities to live the 'good life', and a life they have reason to value (Hart, 2009). This kind of emancipatory education, challenging existing structures of

inequality, necessitates listening to students about the constraints they themselves identify, which prevent them or make it difficult for them to achieve what they value (*ibid.*). Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were deemed the most suitable methods to represent student views as faithfully as possible. My ontological assumptions are based on the capabilities approach and draw on critical pedagogy. A critical paradigm seeks to expose the operation of power, to move from oppression and inequality to bringing about social justice, equity and equality (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p.32). Young's (2011, pp.37-38) conceptualisation of 'oppression', as the systemic constraints which prevent people from learning and using 'expansive skills in socially recognised settings' overlaps the ontological space of Sen's capabilities approach. Structures of oppression may lead to adaptive preferences and constraints which prevent people from participating in determining their own actions and the conditions under which they exercise their actions. 'Others' determine what the 'actions' should be - the purpose and aim of education, what students learn, and for which kind of life, whether it is valued or not by students themselves, they are prepared. Students may adapt their aspirations for a 'good life' to what they deem as feasible given the social, economic and political milieu they inhabit (Sen, 2001, p.63). Hart (2013, pp.24-25) describes adaptive preferences in the capabilities approach as a person's possible adaptation of their preferences in response to the social constraints they experience, whether consciously or unconsciously.

According to Martins (2011), one reading of the capabilities approach, from what he terms a critical realist relational ontology, sees individuals and social structures as ontologically distinct; however, social structures, the environment and technological structures enable or constrain human agency. Emphasising individuals as living interdependently with others, and in their environment, Oosterlaken (2011) also includes technology in the relational ontology of Sen's capabilities approach; the availability or not of technical artefacts affecting the expansion of people's capabilities. The individual is immersed in the world, affected by their environment and the real opportunities available to flourish and live the 'good life'. Sen (2001, pp.70-71) also states that personal differences and environmental, social and family differences affect 'wellbeing advantages'. The capabilities approach, the assumptions of which I am making my own in this research study on students' perceptions of the 'good life', sees wellbeing as going beyond the economic. Sen (2001, pp.125-126) recognises that the interests of the market and the economy can sometimes run counter to those of society. The normative position of the capabilities approach is that 'social arrangements should be primarily evaluated according to the extent of freedom people

have to promote or achieve functionings they value' (Hart, 2013, p.21). These freedoms are reflected in a person's capabilities. Terzi (2007, p.30) contends that the absence or lack of opportunities to be educated would hamper the individual's wellbeing. Education is fundamental because the formation of other capabilities depend on it. Education is 'inherent to the very possibility of leading a good life' (i*bid.*). In education resources do not tell the whole story, making places available in Higher Education (HE) does not ensure the capability of students to partake effectively of the opportunities offered (Hart, 2013, p.23). While focusing on each individual student's views methodologically, I reject ontological individualism and delve into students' relationships with the world around them. The 'world' students inhabit consists of, amongst others: the policy space in which vocational education operates, social structures, their environment, peers, family, the pedagogical approach in schools and their work culture (Flores-Crespo, 2007, p.45; Sen, 2001, pp.70-71).

The capabilities approach, necessarily anti-capitalist according to Walker (2010), and informed or allied with the frame provided by critical pedagogy helped inform me, as a researcher, of student views on the structures of the educational system which affect their journey through the education system, their aspirations for a 'good life' and their valued capabilities. Using the capabilities approach together with critical pedagogy helped develop my awareness of the effects of power structures in the educational process, and how these impact on students, while opening my research to discovering non-instrumental perspectives to education in terms of wellbeing, flourishing and the 'good life', according to the students themselves (Walker, 2010). Grix (2002) describes how decisions about research should flow from decisions about ontology, epistemology, methodology, methods and sources, in that order. The starting point for research is ontology (*ibid.*). Meaning is constructed by students in the context of their lived experiences, the society they live in and their perceptions of what is expected of them and how society perceives them. For example, as noted in Chapter One, female students may be expected to take on traditional, care-giving roles after they complete their studies. Following Sen (2001) and Freire (2000) the political, economic, social and environmental contexts affect how people see themselves, decide what they want, can or cannot achieve. The epistemological consequence of Sen and Freire's ontological stances is an interpretivist approach to gaining knowledge about student perceptions of education. Writing about the implications of the capabilities approach for action research, Walker (2005) calls for researchers to focus their attention on the educational processes which enable students to form wide capability sets.

The ‘social’ affects the capability space in the form of structures of governance, societal norms and environmental and economic factors (Grix, 2002). A positivist approach must necessarily measure directly observable phenomena and may be ill-suited to acknowledge complexities, nuances and variety. An interpretivist approach, on the other hand, emphasises both the role of agents and structures, as opposed to positivist approaches that assume some kind of agent, unaffected by power differentials, social structures, the environment and the economic sphere.

Personal positioning

Who the researcher is affects how data is interpreted and how data is ‘listened to’. I never wanted to become a teacher. Maybe it is because both my parents were secondary school teachers and because I wanted to do something different or ‘better’ than my parents. The reasons why I did not want to follow my parents’ footsteps career-wise had more to do with the promise of the good salaries paid by industry, compared to, in my view, more modest teachers’ salaries. My view of education as a teenager, and the choices I made at the time may have been heavily influenced by economic considerations, albeit probably based on perceptions rather than fact. Participants in this study still emphasise the importance of education to their careers. After some eight years in the pharmaceutical manufacturing industry things had become routine and boring, and I taught for a couple of years in a private secondary school. My own schooling was always in state schools. From my village primary school I went on to a selective state ‘grammar’ type secondary school and the state sixth-form college. Learning became very content heavy for me at sixth-form, but on resitting some exams I read for a degree in Chemistry with Computer Studies at the University of Malta. After the struggle of a tough and demanding three year course I landed a job in the pharmaceutical manufacturing industry. I went on to study part-time for two Master’s degrees. This perception of content heavy and examination driven schooling seems to be still in operation as evidenced by participants in Chapter Five.

My experience of schooling as a student is similar to what Paulo Freire (2000, p.72) referred to as the banking concept of education. The teacher is the repository of knowledge. The teacher makes all the choices – from what is to be discussed, to how the knowledge is passed down to students. Teaching was geared towards coaching students to pass examinations and accessing the University of Malta, the only Higher Education (HE) institution at the time. Reading for a degree at the University of Malta, was in my view, the

ultimate achievement. Students in this study also refer to the traditional academic route and the University of Malta as the more prestigious institution. My own examination oriented schooling and my short stint as a teacher at a private school, shaped my attitudes and practice as a new teacher thrown into the deep end without any specific training. In my first teaching experience my practice could probably be described as, in Dewey's (2008b, p.177) words, 'dominated by the past, by custom, and routine'. I taught as I myself was taught. I did what was expected of me – preparing students for the all important Ordinary Level examination. The repetition of concepts laid out in the examination board's syllabus, exercises and working through past papers were the order of the day. The demands on me were similar to those referred to by Hargreaves (2000): a teacher teaching a relatively large group, trying to maintain students' attention and, the most important of all covering all the content of the syllabus. I was treating the class as a kind of 'collective student'.

The issue of structural limits to improving classroom teaching highlighted by Hargreaves (2000) rang a bell. This experience made me more aware that producing what the school's management wanted – as many passes as possible in externally set examinations where 'the same textbook is thumbed for a long period... spontaneity is excluded and likewise novelty and variety' (Dewey, 2008b, pp.154-155), was not necessarily what students wanted, or indeed, needed. On becoming a lecturer, around seven years ago, although the system at MCAST feels less prescriptive than at secondary school level, I noticed the emphasis on preparing students to be good technical workers, model employees and to 'fit into the system', rather than people who question the current power structures – the employee as a subordinate who obeys, a citizen who stays in line. The emphasis on 'learning for work' is comforting for vocational students - they usually have a very clear idea of what they want to do. But is this limiting them? Are they being encouraged never to dare? Are they limited by the 'past, custom and routine' (Dewey, 2008b, p.277)?

My dissertation research is closely related to my professional work as a lecturer who is not only interested of passing on 'knowledge' to students. I wanted to learn what student value, for students to challenge my conception of education and what I think it should give students. The discourse in policy on education as preparation for work and also the political discourse about education in Malta, emphasising education as some kind of economic investment by the state, also pushed me to explore what students think. My hope is that my dissertation makes a small contribution to learning about what Higher Education (HE) students and more particularly MCAST students think about education, what they

think they are getting out of post-compulsory education, what they want to do after finishing their studies, and more generally, their perceptions of what the 'good life' is.

Prior to embarking on the Doctorate of Education, I read for Science-based degrees and worked in industry for around ten years. On reading for a Social Science degree I had to shift from a 'positivistic' mind set, looking for hard and firm truths, to opening up to a possibility of diversity and no one hard and fast 'truth'. This research study is also a process of learning for me. As Freire (2014, p.35) declares, 'there is no such thing as teaching without research'. Learning from students' experiences in life means to acknowledge and respect what students know and to establish an 'intimate' connection between knowledge and the students' lives (*ibid.,* p.36). By researching where they teach educators will be better able to reflect on what they do and to integrate theory with practice (Daniels and Arapostathis, 2005). I am interested in improving my practice and in learning about students at the college where I work, in learning and listening to their voices as human beings with a range of interests and values, not just as future (and current) workers, being prepared to serve as cogs in the economic machine.

Student voice through interviews and focus groups

In my study each outlook, opinion and stance is important. The capabilities approach emphasises the importance of all individuals having real opportunities or capabilities to flourish. Each individual brings their own particular view which enriches the study. The conception of 'the good life' might be different for each student; there is not one ideal set of capabilities and valued functionings. The interpretative paradigm locates the researcher in the world, the same world as the research participants. Research is influenced by the researcher's values, cultural norms and assumptions - 'our view of the world will influence the questions we are motivated to explore and the means we see as optimal' to get the answers we seek (Hart, 2014, p.26). During the research process meanings are negotiated between the researcher and the researched (*ibid.*, p.27).

My privileging of student voice means that I choose to avoid the potentially reductionist explanations more positivist, quantitative methods may lead to, since these may oversimplify complex human relationships (Morehouse, 2012, p.2). Although my values necessarily affected my interpretation of student voice, my choice of semi-structured

interviews and focus groups meant that participants could, albeit within constraints of the themes discussed, focus the discussions on their opinions rather than having to choose from pre-prepared lists as in questionnaires. The capabilities approach's focus on individuals and structures which enable or constrain the formation of capabilities and agency, suggests to me that interpretative inquiry reflects the spirit and ontological basis of the approach. According to Morehouse (2012, p.3) interpretative inquiry obliges the researcher 'to look at the person as an agent in context acting in and with others in the world'. Cook-Sather (2006) writing about children, insists that young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching and schooling, which perspectives, she contends have been somewhat neglected in educational research. The assumption is that policy makers or adults know best. Ormston *et al.* (2014, p.21) insist on research participants' own interpretations of the issues being studied. They propose that through the interpretative framework researchers can learn in-depth about 'reality', which they call diverse, complex and multifaceted. The interpretivist paradigm emphasises the importance of exploring and understanding perspectives in the context of the conditions and circumstances of people's lives (Ormston *et al.*, 2014, p.22). I was able to gain experience conducting interviews and focus groups as tools to collect data for interpretation in a pilot study undertaken with Advanced Diploma in Applied Science (Level 4) students during the academic year preceding the data collection for this study. Two one-to-one interviews and one focus group with five participants were conducted.

Sen and Freire insist on listening to individual voices, of not treating students as receptacles into which information is 'poured' and of respecting their life experiences and their background. I am not interested in aggregating and tallying the number of opinions or particular phrases students in this study talked to me about. I did not choose questionnaires with pre-determined questions and standard answers from which students were to choose. Neither did I ask students to prioritise their preferred capabilities from a list of capabilities I had chosen beforehand. During interviews students could talk about their experiences without any interruptions from others and without worrying about the reaction to their opinions from their peers. The focus group discussions provided a forum for students to compare and contrast their different viewpoints and for discussions to develop about points of contention or even agreement. As in the pilot study, the interviews and focus groups were semi-structured, allowing participants to take the conversation, within the limits of the subjects being discussed, to issues they themselves deemed important to discuss in detail. Students were free to choose whether to take part in a one-to-one interview or in a

focus group. The challenge during the interviews and the group interview was to 'hear the data' (Cousin, 2009, p.75). Structured interviews, with set questions and maybe a choice of answers to choose from, or even some type of content analysis were avoided. Counting phrases and words, I feel, would have meant 'tuning' my hearing to what I, as the researcher, want to hear, and blocking out other knowledge which semi-structured interviews and a discussion-like atmosphere which I tried to create may yield. I feel it is not possible for me to anticipate what students, in a different position in the college hierarchy than me as a lecturer may come up with. The open-ended nature of the focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews meant that meaning and knowledge was produced by and with students.

Hydén and Bülow (2003) ask whether participants in focus groups actually represent groups outside the focus group, or if they act as themselves or as members of a group. According to them focus groups participants should be selected because they are homogeneous in some respects but should not previously be acquainted with one another nor constituting a 'natural group'. In my study the focus group participants do form a natural group since each groups consisted of students from the same class at the same college. Students preferred to take part in focus groups with their peers, maybe because they felt more comfortable discussing with people they already knew. As much as possible I tried to keep the focus groups as close as possible to what Hydén and Bülow (2003) call a conversation 'not so different from everyday talk'. In focus groups the interactions between participants are an important feature, hence the suggestion of choosing participants who do not know each other (Hydén and Bülow, 2003; Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p.436). Cousin (2009, p.60), though, while acknowledging that most researchers recommend participants who are strangers to each other, says that this is not a hard and fast principle and that participants may be recruited from pre-existing groups. My study focused on a particular set of students, and although students in my focus groups were classmates, they attended different schools before coming to MCAST, and have different experiences by virtue of being distinct individuals with their own life-stories. The focus group discussion still offers space for participants to challenge and discuss each other's views. The focus groups encouraged discussions to develop, with a wider range of responses as a result of the interaction between people, than that developed in individual interviews. The one-to-one interviews, on the other hand, provided a more in-depth discussion of the opinions, hopes, perceptions and aspirations of individual students.

Individual interviews offered a choice to research participants who might prefer more 'private' conversations without the pressure of 'performing' in a group, in which some people may dominate the discussion and persons with unpopular views may be reticent in expressing these in front of others (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, pp.432-433). The challenge was to interpret participants' opinions and perceptions and, in the process, discovering as far as possible why they think how they do, who and what influences their opinions, and what makes them change or reconsider such opinions. Alvesson (2011, loc.326) warns that during interviews some participants might say what they expect the researcher wants to hear or repeat the commonly or socially acceptable polite 'right answers'. The open-ended nature of my interviews gave scope for me to challenge interviewees' statements.

Since I was interested in learning about the same issues from all students participating in this study, the same question scheme was followed in both interviews and focus groups (see Appendix II). The low degree of structure, while still keeping to the issues related to my research questions, meant that I left the door open for students to come up with new or unexpected views (Alvesson, 2011, loc.1046) about their own education, their aspirations and hopes for living a 'good life'. The interview and focus group data were analysed by listening to the recordings and taking notes and reading through transcriptions. I followed Alvesson's (2011, loc.1185) advice and avoided complex and detailed sorting and categorization of data as grounded theorists are criticised for doing (Alvesson, 2011, loc.2716) and instead focused on the narrative. The capabilities approach's focus on the complexity and individual identity of each person seems to fit better with seeing interviews and focus group discussions as 'insight gathering' rather than 'data collection', and critical interpretation and questioning of interview and focus group 'data' instead of a forced or pseudo-scientific 'neutrality' (Alvesson, 2011, loc.1361, loc.2716). While seeking to represent student voice as faithfully as possible, and despite the clarifications sought during the interviews, the interpretations of meanings remain my own (Alvesson, 2011, loc.87), albeit informed by a review of literature, my own experience as a student, my experience working in an industrial setting similar to that in which some participants have spent work placements and my experience teaching at the college for seven years. Theoretical understanding of the subject matter is essential, according to Alvesson (2011, loc.148). Without this interpretations risk being naïve and shaky.

Different students behaved differently both during interviews and focus group sessions. Some students needed more prompting to speak in detail about their experiences at school, college and about their views about work and about what the 'good life' means to them. Others were comfortable holding a conversation with me with minimal prompting or a formal question and answer to-ing and fro-ing. My familiarity with some students seemed to create an atmosphere of trust, leading to frank and flowing conversations. During focus groups, prompting was not that necessary as students seemed to like comparing their experiences at school and at college. Some focus group participants, however, kept to themselves and let the more confident students take the lead, limiting themselves to answering questions in short when asked directly for their opinions. While the subject matter of this research study is not highly personal or of a sensitive nature, some students may still not have been comfortable speaking about bad experiences with me, and may have chosen to leave out things they were not comfortable to talk about. However, students still spoke about their relationships with their parents and episodes of bullying in secondary school, among other things.

Ormston *et al.* (2014, p.23) contend that qualitative research is valuable because, while avoiding positivist counting and sorting which force data to fit schemes and templates, it can actually be generalised in terms of the nature and diversity of phenomena. Meaningful qualitative research can provide 'an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world', in my case informing practice by learning about students' expectations, aspirations, experiences and perspectives. Students are well placed to inform education research. I choose to privilege the student voice to, in my small way, redress the exclusion of their voice from conversations about their education. Student voice is conspicuously absent from the policy on vocational education (MCAST, 2015) and the *Higher Education Strategy for Malta* (NCFHE, 2015). Students seem to be seen as silent, passive recipients of what others define as education. Ormston *et al.* (2014, p.23) warn against constructing voice as equal to an individual and as single and uncomplicated. There is no single, monolithic student voice. Students do not experience life in a single collective way. Freire (2001, p.108) contends that to learn to listen, as an educator and teacher, means to accept what is different. Without acceptance, there is no listening. As Smyth (2012) states, I feel that through giving priority to student voice, the variety of different voices helped me move away from the focus on the economy, market and competitiveness discourse on education by seeking understanding from young people themselves about their lives and how they approach things. This does not mean that the market, in the sense of students

attaching importance to being prepared to enter the labour market did not feature in the study, but the perspectives, even about work came from students themselves rather than from the perspective of employers or policy. By adopting approaches that actively listen to young people, I hope that I have opened myself to actually hearing about the issues as they are actually experienced by students themselves (Smyth, 2012). As Giroux (2016, p.115) proposes, I hope that by acknowledging and listening to student voice, I have managed to learn about their actual struggles, aspirations and perspectives on the 'good life', education and their future. The language students use to express themselves is 'inseparable from lived experience and from how people create a distinctive voice' (*ibid.*, p.116).

Research design

I chose participants from the institute at which I work, the Institute of Applied Sciences at MCAST because of my familiarity with the culture, procedures and with the course content of the degrees students are reading for. As Munn and Drever (2004, p.3) explain, the strength of researching in the context of one's own practice is that the researcher is already familiar with the research context. The fact that at the time of writing this dissertation I had been working at MCAST's Institute of Applied Sciences (IAS) as a full time lecturer for seven years and, through interaction with students here throughout the years, their attitudes towards work and education, put me in a better position to interpret student views as expressed in the interviews and focus groups. I also have a professional interest in getting to know what students value and want from education and in life and what affects their attitudes to education and their aspirations. The choice was also pragmatic, since the research for this dissertation had to be completed in a reasonable but limited timeframe. The aim was to sample students across the three different degree courses and the different years of each course.

The students in my study are all Higher Education (HE) students at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). The college, as described in Chapter Two offers courses from the basic levels of the European and Maltese Qualifications Frameworks (EQF/MQF), through Level 4 Advanced Diplomas, up to Higher Diplomas (Level 5), Bachelor's (Level 6) and the recently introduced Master's (Level 7) degrees. HE students at the IAS site in which the study was conducted followed one of three degree courses; although students have the option to exit with a Higher Diploma after two years. The

courses are Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Health Science, Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Environmental Engineering and Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Chemical Technology. I will refer to these degrees as BHS, BEE and BCT respectively in the remainder of this study. Table 4.1 below shows the number of students reading for each degree in the academic year 2017-2018, the year during which the data was collected.

Number of students in course per cohort	1st year Total (Male, Female)	2nd year Total (Male, Female)	3rd year Total (Male, Female)
BHS	13 (M:2, F:11)	8 (M:4, F:4)	8 (M:2, F:6)
BEE	14 (M:9, F:5)	9 (M:6, F:3)	13 (M:7, F:6)
BCT	20 (M:12, F:8)	17 (M:11, F:6)	11 (M:7, F:4)

Table 4.1 - Number of students in each cohort of each BSc (Hons.) degree at the IAS - academic year 2017-2018

Nine interviews were carried out, together with three focus groups. The initial plan was to recruit one interview participant from each year of each degree course. However, since BEE second year students who wanted to take participate in this study all preferred to take part in a focus group and not in one-to-one interviews, a BEE third year student was interviewed instead. All focus groups' participants were in their second year of their course. This is because most of those who applied to take part in the study were in their second year of their degree and so focus groups could be formed from this group of students. As explained, students also expressed their wish, for logistical reasons and maybe also because they felt more comfortable, to participate in a focus group with their classmates. Twenty-four students in total participated in focus groups and interviews, exactly half of all students reading for a Bachelor's degree at the Institute of Applied Sciences in the 2017-2018 academic year.

While the proportion of students interviewed individually or in a group is not central to my methodology, since each voice contributes to a rich account of student agency and wellbeing in the spirit of the capabilities approach, the high proportion of degree students involved in the study enriches the study through a variety of views and perspectives and is more conducive to comparing differences in student perceptions of their freedoms or un-freedoms (Șerban-Oprescu, 2011).

Participants for the interviews or focus groups were asked to fill in a short questionnaire. The information collected helped in my interpretation of the focus group and interview data. Participants were asked to indicate their age reached during the year of the study, the

degree they were reading for and the stage they were in (years 1, 2 or 3), together with their father's and mother's occupation and the type of secondary schools they attended. This data is shown in tables 4.2 and 4.3 below. Pseudonyms are used instead of students' actual names. Alvesson (2011, loc.499) questions whether it is possible to claim an understanding of ''extra-narrative' phenomena such as social conditions, culture, beliefs or even selves' from interviews. It is one thing extracting student perceptions from an interview transcript and quite another making bold statements and strong knowledge claims on the reasons for these perceptions. Asking students to answer a short questionnaire outlining their prior educational trajectories together with some basic details of their family background may have gone some way into helping me interpret and contextualise their opinions.

Pseudonym	Course and year	Age (in 2018)	Father's and Mother's occupation	Secondary School
Richard	BHS 1	21	Technician - Salesperson	Church school
Luke	BEE 1	20	Engineer - Notary	Church school
Mary	BCT 1	21	Carpenter - Housewife	State school
John	BHS 2	22	Retired - Retired	Church school
Dylan	BCT 2	22	Mechanic - Waitress	State school
Rebecca	BHS 3	25	Food and beverage manager - Teacher	Church school
Matthew	BEE 3	24	Technical officer (civil service) - Radiographer–	State school
Martina	BEE 3	26	Sports coach - Hairdresser	Church school
Christine	BCT 3	22	Truck driver - Housewife/factory worker	State school

Table 4.2 - Interview participants

Focus Group 1 - BEE Year 2			
Pseudonym	**Age (in 2018)**	**Father's and Mother's occupation**	**Secondary School**
Mark	21	Teacher - Nurse	Church school
Andrew	23	Watchman - Housewife	State school
Benjamin	20	Biomedical engineer - Housewife	Church school
Anne	22	Shop manager - Accountant	State school
David	22	H&S Inspector - Medical Doctor	Church school
Daniela	23	Chief Officer - Teacher	State school
Focus Group 2 - BCT Year 2			
Pseudonym	**Age (in 2018)**	**Father's and Mother's occupation**	**Secondary School**
James	21	Soldier - Sales assistant	State school
Sandro	21	Customs officer - Social services manager	Church school
Kevin	23	Retired - Social worker	Church school
Claire	23	General Manager - Housewife	Private school
Paula	22	Auditor social welfare standards (civil service) - Purchasing officer	Church school
Elena	23	Mechanic - Housewife	State school
Focus Group 3 - BHS Year 2			
Pseudonym	**Age (in 2018)**	**Father's and Mother's occupation**	**Secondary School**
Ruth	22	Storekeeper - Clerk Government Authority	Church school
Roberta	21	Officer Tourism Authority- Tennis Club Manager	State school
Sarah	20	Retired - Housewife	Church school

Table 4.3 - Focus groups' participants

Ethical considerations

Prior to undertaking the study, ethical approval was obtained from both the University of Glasgow, College of Social Sciences, and from the research committee at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology. The interview and focus group questions and topics of dicussion focused on student experiences in education, and about what they aspired to be and do after completing their studies. It is unlikely that this study could cause personal harm or injury to the students taking part. The focus groups and interviews took place in safe and familiar surroundings for students, that is at the college itself. Focus group and interview times were arranged such that these caused the least disruption possible for students, such as directly after lectures finished for the day, or during free periods in between lectures. I did not conduct any research interviews during lectures, nor during my own lectures, since that would have deprived students of teaching time and made it difficult for any students to refuse to participate.

All HE students attending courses which had cohorts for all the three years of the Bachelor's degrees they were reading for, were eligible to participate in the study. A participant information sheet (Appendix I) explaining the study was distributed to degree students present at college on the particular days I visited the particular classes. I visited each different group during lectures and explained the study and my interest in hearing student opinions about their education and their plans for the future. On the reverse side of the participant information sheet students could apply to take part in the study. On the sheet they could indicate whether they preferred participating in a one-on-one interview, a focus group or both. I explained that if they ticked both focus group and interview boxes, that I could contact them to take part in one or the other depending on the need, but not for both an interview and a focus group. Students may have felt that if they did not participate in my research it would reflect poorly on them and negatively impact their grades, putting them in my 'bad books', while their colleagues who participate would be somehow advantaged. Students, as per college procedure, however, get to see their marked assignments, tests and examinations, and in addition were reassured that participation or not would have no bearing on their studies. There is also a procedure of internal verification through which a second assessor gets to verify and approve corrected assignments, tests and examinations. Ultimately students may appeal a mark should they deem they have been treated unfairly. Since I taught the first and second year BCT students and supervised the dissertation of a couple of third year students, students were asked to deposit the sheet indicating their willingness to participate in the study with the institute's

secretariat. I only visited a particular group once, so as not to be perceived to be exerting undue pressure on students to participate in my study. Although all students who were at college on the days I visited different groups in class got a participant information sheet, only those who showed up for interviews or focus groups were given a consent form to sign. Before the beginning and at the end of an interview and a focus group session, it was made clear that students could opt out of the study if they so wished. The consent forms can be found in Appendix III.

Data analysis

Hart (2013, p.69) discusses the difficulty in operationalising the capabilities approach in a study applying the approach to young people's aspirations. The language of the capabilities approach is unfamiliar to students. I feel that had I explained the concept of capabilities to students the study would have ended up discussing students' understanding of the concepts underpinning the approach. Instead I chose to translate the concepts of agency freedom, wellbeing freedom, capabilities and functionings into everyday language. So instead of asking about capabilities and functionings, I discussed and asked about students' aspirations and life goals and whether they thought that education was helping them reach their goals. Rather than asking directly about adaptive preferences, pedagogy and enabling or oppressive structures, I asked whether they would make the same choices all over again, discussed the challenges they face, what their peer and family think about educations, and so on. According to Giddens (1993, p.168) society is 'produced' by members of that society, not deliberately or intentionally but through the social structures themselves creating and reproducing meanings, norms, and power. Sen explains how 'opportunities and prospects depend crucially on what institutions exist and how they function' (Sen, 2001, p. 142). MCAST, being a vocational college and more open-access than other institutions such as academic sixth-form colleges, may lead to MCAST students themselves and society perceiving them as following less prestigious courses. This in turn may affect their preferences, aspirations and capability development. The capability to be educated and the factors enabling or constraining this capability were explored by asking students about their experience in the educational system, what they liked or disliked and what they think makes a good teacher. Their educational trajectory and why they were studying at a vocational college were discussed, including issues of prestige and social perceptions. Students were asked whether they would have preferred to study elsewhere -

again to explore the factors affecting their trajectory and their agency freedom. Agency was also explored by discussing their choice of subjects and courses. Agency was further explored by discussing with students why they made their particular choices of subject areas and also of post-compulsory institution.

As noted earlier, Deprez and Wood (2013, p.146) caution that the framing of Higher Education (HE) as preparation for employment, and little else, may lead to students adapting their preferences to study what is socially constructed as desirable rather then what they really value. This possibility was explored by asking what interests they might have outside of college and whether they would make the same choices again given the chance. Vocational education - even at HE level - is emphatically sold as preparation for work and for the needs of the economy, following the human capital model. Students' opinions were solicited on what they think they are being prepared for and what they thought they should be prepared for. The content of the course, whether they found the content useful, whether they deemed the need for other subjects to be included in the course syllabus, and whether they felt that the knowledge they accessed through the course helped them achieve their goals were discussed. This line of discussion helped me assess whether students saw education as purely instrumental or as transformative and empowering. Capabilities inspired pedagogy (Deprez and Wood, 2013, p.148) should build students' capacity for critical reasoning and reflection, and to rationally justify their opinions. Wellbeing is also promoted by ensuring that students are supported to achieve through for example scaffolding to aid students build their confidence to achieve. Students were asked about the course content, the college's procedures, what they like and what they think should be improved. Since some students had already been on work placements or on apprenticeships, if they had completed their pre-degree course at MCAST, learning through work and the benefits or not of work experience was discussed. Students were asked directly about their aspirations, what they think makes a 'good life', where they see themselves after completing their degree and in the future. What hinders and helps them reach their aspirations was also discussed to assess what they deem as obstacles to expanding their capabilities and converting capabilities into functionings, as was what makes them feel satisfied, fulfilled and happy in life. The discussion sometimes also veered into the perceptions of the public and employers of MCAST, as compared to the longstanding and 'academic' University of Malta. Societal perceptions may affect students' functionings in that they may not feel that society treats them the same as students from a more prestigious institution, which may hinder the conversion of

capabilities to functionings. The interview and focus group scheme, in English and Maltese can be found in Appendix II. The scheme is only a rough guide to what was discussed. The conversations with students both during individual interviews and during focus groups did not follow the scheme to the letter. Students emphasised and talked at length about what they felt was important to them and took the conversation wherever they saw fit. As emphasised earlier, since the same topics relating to the research questions were to be discussed in both focus groups and one-to-one interviews the same scheme was used for both data collection methods.

All interviews and focus groups sessions were recorded and subsequently transcribed. A thematic analysis strategy was used to interpret the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data analysis involved first of all getting familiar with the data. This was achieved through the transcription process itself and through repeatedly reading the transcripts and hearing the recordings. The transcripts were coded, starting with one focus group. For example, when students spoke about their favourite teacher, the code 'teachers' was used, when they talked about how they were taught and how they learnt, 'teaching and learning' was used. When talking about their family the code 'family' was used, and so on. Descriptive codes were then, through repeated readings of the texts, grouped and refined into themes – for example: *misfit students, lost in huge impersonal clases,* and *prestige trumps reason*. These were subsequently grouped into overarching themes, that is capabilities students mentioned or valued – such as *Respect, dignity and recognition, Learning disposition* and *Practical reason*. Identifying themes helped identify the meanings emerging from the data (Cousin, 2009, pp.36-37). Student expressed opinions about the three major areas they were asked about, namely, teaching and learning, including their take on the atmosphere at schools or colleges students attended; students' trajectories through the education system, choice of subjects and institutions; and students' aspirations for their post-college future, which included their perceptions of a 'good life' after college and their working life.

The process of identifying themes was informed by the discussion about education and capabilities in Chapter Three, and the capabilities literature. In line with Sen's commitment to participation and deliberation in the formulation of lists it was important for me, for the research to be conducted in a manner which allowed the voices of students to identify themselves the capabilities they value, that is the real opportunities they feel they had or have and which opportunities or freedoms they wish to have access to. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis because of its theoretical freedom, gives the

researcher a tool which can provide a rich, detailed and complex account of data. Braun and Clarke (2006), however, emphasise the researcher's active role in the interpretation of data and criticise descriptions of themes 'emerging' from the data as if themes passively emerge from it. They highlight the need, given the central role of the researcher in data interpretation, for the theoretical framework and methods used in a research study, to match what the researcher wants to know. My analysis, following Wilson-Strydom (2016) focused on looking for themes around capabilities. As explained above, and detailed in Chapter Five, the themes identified, were grouped into overarching themes or capabilities that students valued. It is pertinent to point out once again, that the line of questioning during the data collection did not include specific questions about capabilities or specific lists of capabilities. Instead, through open-ended questions (Appendix II) about how the students experienced school, how they are experiencing college, and their aspirations for the future and so on, it was possible to identify the capabilities that the students described as important. Similarly, Stephens *et al.* (2015) in a study on living standards of older people in New Zealand also used thematic analysis to interpret interview data, with valued functionings assigned as themes. I chose to focus on capabilities, because I was interested not just in what students are actually free to do, but also in what they value, irrespective of whether they have converted that capability into a functioning or not.

In the next chapter I will report on the capabilities students value, as interpreted and emerging from the interview and focus group data. The themes and capabilities emerging from the data will be discussed together with the conversion factors students think are needed for them, or more generally for students, to convert these capabilities into functionings. I do not aim to 'test' for the actual development or not of particular capabilities or actual functionings, but to paint a tentative picture, bringing together the perceptions and opinions of different students, of what students think a 'good life', at school, college and after finishing their education, would look like.

Chapter Five - Students' perceptions of the 'good life' through education

In the previous chapter, the choice of methods used in this dissertation, that is, interviews and focus groups, were discussed. Their use is justified since I am interested in the students' voice and perceptions, not the voice of policy documents. The capabilities approach necessitates listening for the valued 'beings and doings' of individuals and not treating people, or in my case students, as one homogeneous group, irrespective of their background and personal experiences. The thematic analysis was conducted within a framework of capabilities related to students and education. Student narratives were examined through repeated reading and reference to examples in literature, to elicit the capabilities or opportunities in education and in life that students valued. Walker (2006, p.19) describes Higher Education (HE) and the schooling preceding it as a 'remaking of the self', with students forming their identities as new knowledge and understandings develop. The reframing of the students' world may occur if the pedagogical conditions that support human flourishing are provided. Previous educational experience, that is the students' experience compulsory education, will affect their attitudes to education at post-compulsory level. According to Sow Paino (2013, p.227), personal conversion factors necessary to convert educational opportunities into real opportunities or capabilities that individuals have good reason to value include motivation, the will to overcome challenges, previous educational experience, and family support.

Cassidy (2018, p.19) makes a pertinent point about the 'good life'. While students, especially young children, are not in a position to control all aspects of their lives, wellbeing is never on hold; it is a state of being and doing stretching throughout a person's life course, and not something children or students wait for until they reach adulthood or finish their educational trajectory. As such, the experience at school and college contributes to students' wellbeing. Students also discuss how they see life in the future, after college, and indicate what they think would constitute a 'good life' after finishing their degrees. The various themes identified during the data analysis, will be described in this chapter. The themes are grouped into overarching themes – the capabilities students wish they have, value or actually have.

The capabilities, valued opportunities or freedoms, discussed are implied in the students' narratives. I will refer to the courses the students quoted in this chapter are following as

BHS for BSc (Hons.) in Health Science, BEE for the BSc (Hons.) in Environmental Engineering, and BCT for the BSc (Hons.) in Chemical Technology. A number following the course acronym indicates whether a particular student was in their first, second, or third and final year of their course when interviewed. For example, BCT2 indicates a second year BSc (Hons.) Chemical Technology student. Comments and ideas from focus groups will be indicated by adding FG to the course and year acronym. For example, BCT2 FG is the focus group in which BSc (Hons.) Chemical Technology students participated in.

Respect, dignity and recognition

The first overarching theme identified is the capability for respect, dignity and recognition. Walker (2006, pp.128-129) describes the capability for respect, dignity and recognition as being able to have respect for oneself and for and from others, treated with dignity and not being diminished or devalued because of one's personal characteristics, beliefs or status, such as class, gender and religion. It includes having a voice for effective participation in learning. Students in my study mentioned being treated with respect, or not, by teachers, lecturers and fellow students. They also mentioned systemic issues which hinder or help students acquire this capability.

The conditions for student flourishing in schools were described by Martina (BEE3). Her narrative brought to the fore the possible overemphasis on success as measured by examinations and grades in Malta. She recalled her experience in primary school: "I lost one mark in my Science exam and I went to my teacher and I asked her why I lost one mark". Martina mentions bullying as a constraining conversion factor, affecting wellbeing and the capability of respect, dignity and recognition (Walker, 2006, p.128). She recounts how she changed school in the sixth year of primary school, from a private English-speaking school to a Maltese-speaking girls nuns' school. Martina said that at the new school she found it difficult to integrate with the Maltese-speaking girls. Moreover, the change from a coeducational environment to a girls-only school seems to have affected her – 'More backstabbing and talking behind your back and all this stuff. I wasn't really the happiest person.' Most of the conversation with Martina was conducted in English. Certain private schools and Catholic schools enforce the use of English as the main or only school language and students are sometimes punished or ridiculed for speaking Maltese (Camilleri Grima, 2013). A theme identified in Martina's narrative is *English as a language of*

exclusion.

Richard (BHS1) also touches on the 'preference' shown to English-speakers at the boys' Catholic school he attended. The former coloniser's language, English, is used as a mark of social superiority. He tells me straight away that he did not have fun at school.

> "I am interested in education but the school environment, it was not my type of environment. I think there was a culture clash, the English-speaking students, they can speak whatever language they like, but they treated others, those who speak Maltese and whose parents had certain jobs, they treated us differently. There were good things at school, they used to push us to succeed, and the discipline, they were quite strict. Without discipline I don't know how I would have ended." (Richard, BHS1)

Another theme is that of *misfit students*; students are expected to blend in and adapt their identities to that of the school. Competition for good grades was the be all and end all at Richard's (BHS1) secondary school. Richard (BHS1) describes how it is the atmosphere or environment at his former school itself which may have been 'disrespectful', in the sense that certain students did not feel comfortable there. Probably, although Richard says that they were 'pushed' to achieve, the school actually may have restricted students' agency by channelling students into what are perceived as prestigious traditional careers, such as medical doctors for those choosing Science subjects or lawyers for those choosing Arts. Richard suggests that the school 'preferred' students from English-speaking families. The school's environment was not conducive to flourishing, since only students from certain backgrounds were, at least according to Richard, valued. The school's portrayal of certain professions as 'the right ones' may have pushed Richard to try to get into the medical doctors' course; maybe not because he really wished to, but because of the prestige associated with that profession. On being asked whether he would have chosen subjects such as History, he said he liked the subject, but Sciences interested him most. John (BHS2) also speaks of his experience at an all-boys Catholic school. He felt that he did not fit into the school's ethos of drilling students for examinations. He said that he did not like football and that was all they played at school. He did not fit in. A welcoming environment for a variety of students with varied interests, from those who like to read, those who cannot sit still for a long time, and those who like to kick a ball around, comes out as important for a happy school experience. The school ethos of success through measuring grades may in fact jeopardise the capability of respect, dignity and recognition of students' differences, which in turn may affect students' wellbeing.

Rebecca (BHS3) echoes Richard (BHS1) about not fitting in, or of being a *misfit student*, when talking about her experience at an all-girls Catholic nuns'school known for its English-speaking elitist ethos. She said the school environment was "too strict". She confesses that she hated Mathematics and Maltese but liked Biology. She avoided Chemistry and Physics. Clarifying her options, she said that at school they could either choose all three Sciences or just one of them. Not fitting in and clashing with the school's environment as a negative conversion factor affecting the capability for respect, dignity and recognition (Walker, 2006, p.128) is clear. An elitist, rigid environment means that Rebecca did not feel recognised and respected at school.

> "I was happy with some teachers but wasn't happy at school. They were overly strict. The nuns were cruel. They had their favourites." (Rebecca, BHS3)

The theme of *negative relationships with teachers* in touched upon by Mary (BCT1). She speaks about her favourite subject in secondary school, Biology. She says she still liked the subject even though "the teacher wasn't good; he was rough". McMahon *et al.* (2016) emphasise the debilitating effects of a negative teacher-student relationship because of a teacher's authoritarian, apathetic, unsupportive, uncaring, unjust, aggressive and unreasonable attitude, on imaginings of further education, especially on working-class students with no family members who can transmit their positive experience of post-compulsory education.

> "A good teacher focuses on their students, they do not favour one student over others. It might be difficult not to have favourite students, but if you're a professional, you have to be fair." (Mary, BCT1)

Dylan (BCT2) tells a story of a boy who was not really interested in schooling – another *misfit student*, in a system favouring compliance. He did not pass the selective examination, abolished since then, at the end of primary school, which streamed those who passed into 'junior lyceums', or what could be termed as state grammar schools, and the rest to 'area secondary schools'. He lacked the conversion factor of motivation and seemed not to see the point of schooling. Although it may be problematic to classify students as coming from working-class or middle-class backgrounds, Dylan's parents' occupations indicate a working-class family. Dylan's father is a car repair mechanic and his mother a waitress.

> "Although I wasn't really interested, I liked Maths and Physics and still managed to learn something, despite my very low grades. I really liked playing football instead of studying. I got very low grades in my O-Level exams. Then, one day, people from counselling spoke to us and really pushed us to continue studying. They said that there is a lot of work in the Sciences. I decided to continue studying and started a foundation course in Science at MCAST." (Dylan, BCT2)

Dylan suggests he was not mature enough to realise the importance of doing well at school. He started from the lowest level at the Institute of Applied Sciences, following a Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) Level 2 foundation course, progressing through Level 3 and Level 4 courses before following the degree course. Dylan said that he lacked interest in learning at secondary school. The fact that he did not pass his examinations to access a selective state grammar-type secondary school did not bother him. According to him, the "good students" were coached in a separate class "for those interested in learning", in preparation for examinations. The pedagogical environment did not promote flourishing. It did not respect and recognise Dylan's and other students' particular needs and human diversity. A serendipitous talk by the school's counselling department, albeit at the very end of secondary school, convinced Dylan to make an effort to continue education. Individual advice and attention seemed to play a part in Dylan choosing to continue his education, and eventually to read for a degree.

> "Well, my school wasn't [a good school] … there was only one class who were interested in learning, I wasn't in that class, so…" (Dylan, BCT2)

Students who are deemed as not interested in school are sometimes not helped to discover their interests and even told, directly or indirectly, that school and further study is not for them (McMahon *et al.,* 2016). The availability of a second chance route, through the lower level courses at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) seemed to make Dylan rethink his aspirations and develop his capability to be educated and his capability to aspire. The conversion factors seemingly unavailable during his compulsory education, including the labelling of students who failed their end of primary school examinations as unsavable, educationally speaking, are available through the second chance route provided by MCAST. The structures of oppression in Dylan's case seem to be the assumption that all students should learn in one particular way: sitting down and taking notes in class. The 'oppressors' assume that all should be interested in the subjects offered at school and accept the ways of learning offered by the traditional transmission mode of teaching. Giroux (2016, p.126) refers to an instrumentalist form of liberal

pedagogy which caters for those who fit into the culturally specific practices of school. The practices of the school are not problematised, it is students who do not fit in who are perceived as *misfit students*, 'other', 'deviant' or 'uncultured'.

Students' narratives seem to suggest that students' are expected to fit the system and aim for prestigious professions. Examinations and teaching and learning to 'pass examinations' is also obvious from their narratives, as is the lack of flexibility by the system when it comes to the diversity of students' attitudes to education. The respect students expect is a flexible system, fitting their needs, interests and aspirations. The emphasis on one of Malta's official languages (other than the national and also official language, Maltese), English, by some schools as a marker of a 'good' and desirable family background also comes out clear.

Learning disposition

The capability for a learning disposition is described by Walker (2006, p.128) as being able to have the curiosity and a desire for learning, having confidence in one's ability to learn and being an active inquirer. Topper (2019, p.25) adds being able to 'express an opinion, succeed in learning tasks; and being encouraged and supported in learning'. Students in this study were asked about their opinion on what makes a good teacher and a good lecturer. They spoke about their experience in class during lessons. Students mention the teaching style and pedagogical approach of teachers, or *supportive teachers*. Teachers' approaches affect the engagement of students, through piquing their interest and involvement in the processes of learning. Their capability for a learning disposition was triggered and developed through the support of teachers. Martina (BEE3) explains what piqued her interest in learning.

> "I liked art at secondary school; I liked the teacher, she was always very nice. Now she is at University [of Malta]. I used to enjoy English Literature. I used to like the way they teach, and I used to like the subject. They used to make me enjoy the subject. I did well and got my O-Levels. I liked them mostly because they were very helpful and they gave me advice; their teaching method was nice and good in my opinion." (Martina, BEE3)

Mary (BCT1) indicates that she comes from a working-class background, she says that her mother is a 'housewife' and that her father is a carpenter. The theme of *supportive teachers*

comes up when she speaks of the factors which made school worthwhile for her, particularly teachers who made their lessons interesting and engaging. Mary is from Gozo, a small island off the coast of Malta. One of her favourite subjects at secondary school was English. Subject teachers seem to play a big part in why students like certain subjects over others, in fact, Mary said that her English teacher was 'really good'.

> "Just talking at the class, and going on and on, is not good, you have to know how to keep students engaged. The English teacher used to get us to act out the plays we studied, it was really interesting. It sticks in your mind." (Mary, BCT1)

Mary (BCT1) mulls becoming a teacher herself because she sees teaching as guiding children to have a good life and helping them form their characters. She recounts how a particular teacher understood her needs at secondary school while others dismissed her as a troublesome student. A focus on subject teaching is not enough for student wellbeing, the structural constraints of class, sitting down and listening lesson after lesson may, in fact, affect some students' wellbeing and agency negatively.

> "I was really naughty; I could not sit still. I was hyperactive, my asthma medication made things worse. But a particular teacher in Form 2 (Year 8) was really helpful. She made arrangements so that I could take time out of lessons to walk around and use up my energy. It made a big difference for me." (Mary, BCT1)

Rebecca (BHS3) makes a similar point, about *supportive teachers* as enablers of the capability for a learning disposition.

> "We had some good teachers. They make learning fun, explain in simple terms." (Rebecca, BHS3)

Matthew (BEE3) went to a selective state secondary school. He speaks of problems with bullying and fighting at school. He speaks of distractions, disruptions and a waste of time because of unruly students during lessons, but refers to *supportive teachers* helping them to learn.

> "I was in the worst class. However, I still managed to get my O-Levels. I don't regret going to the school despite everything. We had good teachers. Those of us who chose Science, we were taught in small groups. Those who wanted to learn, learnt." (Matthew, BEE3)

Matthew speaks of doing well in his Mathematics SEC examination even though he did not do well in school tests. Matthew (BEE3) is a keen ornithologist and says that even at secondary school he was more interested in the outdoors than in school. Despite the issues, Matthew said that school was a mixed bag, with good and bad experiences. Those "who really wanted" passed their examinations to access sixth-form. Aultman *et al.* (2009), in discussing teacher-student relationships and the opinions of teachers in the United States on the boundaries between teachers and students, posit that personal relationships are essential for successful teaching and learning and for student motivation. Safe and supportive classroom environments encourage learning and cultivate engaging pedagogical conversations that hold the interest and imagination of young people.

Christine (BCT3), also from a working-class family, says that her father cannot read or write and that her mother was a factory worker. She gives a very positive picture of her selective state secondary school and of *supportive teachers*. The value of agency in choosing which subjects to focus on is emphasised,

> "I passed the entrance examinations at the end of primary school and went to the Girls' Junior Lyceum. I miss that school. The form teachers used to really guide us and take care of us. We were very young; guidance is important. The lessons were interesting. Being able to choose, that's important, probably it's better now. My boyfriend's nephews and nieces can choose from more subjects. Now they can even choose between Religion and Philosophy. We didn't have that choice." (Christine, BCT3)

The school atmosphere, the pedagogy and positive attitude of teachers is what makes school a happy place for Christine and made her like learning.

> "A good teacher, you know what I'm talking about, gives us breaks, jokes with us. Watching a video, I mean it can be boring sitting down for a long time. In Geography the teacher, for example, used to take out a map for us to see. Design and Technology, I liked that subject a lot. He used to do a lot of practical things. Lots of hands on, there were four areas: textiles, food, mechanical and electrical. We learnt soldering, to cook. The lessons are over quickly, time flies. And teachers who you can relate to, who are approachable. That's important. It's teachers who can make a lesson interesting. I also liked Computer Studies. Ironically, I didn't continue studying those subjects after secondary school." (Christine, BCT3)

Even at MCAST, students seem to value the same teaching approach and methods they considered as 'good teaching' in secondary school. The pedagogical approach and the

relations between lecturers and students, even at post-compulsory level, are very important conversion factors enabling (or constraining) the development of capability of a learning disposition. The difference from secondary school is students' seeing lecturers as experienced professionals in their field. Dylan (BCT2) and Rebecca (BHS3) reiterate a point made regarding secondary school lessons, saying that reading through PowerPoint™ presentations is boring, with Rebecca preferring "teachers [who] if they are explaining, they draw on the board or they bring something to show you". Luke (BEE1) mentioned using different laboratory equipment. Richard (BHS1) emphasises the importance of hands-on learning for him, while others, such as Mary (BCT1), lament routine and monotonous lessons and mention lecturers or teachers who make lessons fun and interesting.

> "Since our subjects are vocational and very specific, we need people who are experienced to teach us. They get some chemical engineer, but he gets to teach completely different subjects from what he's experienced in. A good teacher knows the subject and has experience in the field. I feel that there are certain things in class that you can learn from Google. I come to school to learn new things, not things I can look up on the internet. Most teachers do not like initiating discussions. I think discussions open you up to different views. Most people don't discuss. We do this in [lecturer's name] lessons and I really enjoy it." (Martina, BEE3)

Another theme is *lost in huge impersonal classes*. Small classes and individual attention are perceived as an advantage over the Junior College sixth-form and the University of Malta. Matthew (BEE3) mentions classes of forty students at the Junior College and the difficulty he had in following lectures there. Mark (BEE2 FG) who spent a year at the University of Malta said that there is a lot of individual attention at MCAST, whereas at the University of Malta lectures take pace in huge halls, where 'it was difficult to learn' because lecturers just talk at a fast pace and do not explain. Ruth, Roberta and Sarah (BHS2 FG) said that they preferred small classes, since it was easier to make friends. Large classes at the Junior College also meant that they got distracted easily. They prefer a variety of teaching methods rather than reading from notes, finding it hard to keep up when notes are dictated or to take notes as the lecturer speaks. Probably a consequence of being *lost in huge impersonal classes* is the feeling some students in this study had that they could not cope with the demands of the Matriculation Certificate course. The academic sixth-form route seems to put somewhat unbearable pressure on Richard (BHS1) to get very good grades, with no guarantee of success. The two-year course leading to the Matriculation Certificate is very selective. Statistics are clear: the number of students who

get the full Matriculation Certificate, that is the exact combination of Advanced and Intermediate Level passes to access the University of Malta is quite low. The latest figures show that in 2018, of those who sat for the examinations only 40.9% obtained the full Matriculation Certificate necessary for entry to the University of Malta (MATSEC, 2018, p.34). Even though the number of students qualifying for the Matriculation Certificate was the highest since 2004, in 2018 only 29.3% of all eighteen year olds (4,255 persons) qualified for the full certificate (MATSEC, 2018, pp.52-53). The difference between males and females is stark, with 22.8% of males as opposed to 35.9% of females, qualifying for the Matriculation Certificate. The requirements for access to MCAST degree courses by students who had not followed MCAST Level 4 Advanced Diploma courses are somewhat more achievable, being two individual subjects at Advanced Level and two at Intermediate Level. A criticism of the MATSEC system is that subject syllabuses are content heavy, and that although Intermediate Levels supposedly cover only one-third the content of Advanced Levels, these are said to be more onerous (Ventura, 2015).

While the full Matriculation Certificate was intended to make learning more liberal by making students take a mix of Sciences and Humanities, rather than the previous English system inherited by Malta (that of studying three Advanced Levels), the method of assessment by examinations in which students are expected to reproduce content learnt by heart puts lots of students at a disadvantage, especially since they have to study for examinations in six subjects rather than three. The allowance for students to achieve the Matriculation Certificate over five whole years, rather than after the two-year sixth-form course (Ventura, 2015), is an admission of the content heavy examinations, which seem to test students' recall and memory more than anything else. Camilleri and De Giovanni (2018) mention some reasons for leaving education by early school leavers in Malta, which mirror the preferences expressed by students in this study. The reasons given include having to sit down for long periods of time, having no hands-on activities and not having the opportunity to learn trades or vocational subjects.

The opposite of *supportive teachers* is the unsupportive and unhelpful use of ultra-academic language delivered at speed, talking over students' heads and ignoring students' pleas for more accessible explanation of topics and concepts, something which Mary (BCT1) brings up. It is a form of an oppressive power relationship in which students are shut out of the learning process (Quinn, 2003, p.90). This 'oppressive power' can be construed as a negative conversion factor preventing or, at least, hampering the conversion

of resources into capability of a learning disposition (Wilson-Strydom, 2016). John (BHS2) makes a point about the importance of individual support and a feeling of belonging, while Rebecca (BHS3) values a supportive social environment that enhances learning (Soden and Pithers, 2001) and speaks about her interest in the subject matter she is studying.

> "MCAST was a revolutionary change from me. I have ADHD and here the classes are small, and teachers can give you individual attention. I am now able to study on my own; the atmosphere here helped me. Teachers are friendly; there is respect towards the teacher, but they are more flexible. The subjects in Level 4 Health were interesting, Biology, Health. Good teachers who support you. There is a community feeling. Well, there are still some teachers who have this mentality of teacher in a class… you know." (John, BHS2)

> "MCAST helped me a lot because here I actually started doing something I'm interested in. Here they support you a lot. There is a lot of respect." (Rebecca, BHS3)

Class size was also a conversion factor for Paula (BCT2 FG). She said that she felt lost at the Junior College. She said that although she liked her new-found freedom after secondary school, she felt lost at the Junior College. There are also thousands of students at MCAST, but students are split into classes. It may be more difficult for students to feel supported, to feel that they have *supportive teachers* when they feel lost in a crowd of other students.

> "It was a big difference from secondary school. At school you had your own class, if you don't do your homework, they see what's happening. When I went for the first time to Junior College and saw the huge numbers of students I was overwhelmed. At the Junior College nobody cares if you attend lectures or not. Junior College is surrounded by bars, I ended up going there instead of going to lectures." (Paula, BCT2 FG)

Learning is encouraged by relationships of non-humiliation, and a comfortable and happy learning environment (Walker, 2010). While students might value the opportunities for participation in learning, for speaking out and for being active in the acquisition of knowledge (Walker, 2007, p.180), they may find themselves silenced in a classroom. Institutional setups or structures, such as small classes, instead of lecture theatres, can enhance the students' confidence in one's learning and their desire to learn – their capability for a learning disposition.

Learning disposition - 'playing' to learn

The capability for learning disposition also includes 'being able to have curiosity' (Walker, 2006, p.128). Matthew (BEE3) enthuses about his love of fieldwork, part of the degree he is reading for at MCAST. James (2019, pp.16-18) suggests that play in tertiary level courses is a valuable learning tool, making lectures fun and enabling learning. This theme could be called *playing to learn*. Students from all courses also mention hands-on activities, practical sessions, site visits, fieldwork and 'making learning fun' as ways to increase their engagement in learning. Maybe the emphasis on play in early childhood education, that is having the capability for play, can be applied, albeit differently, to learning at college. Potsi (2018, p.248) quotes an excerpt from the Swedish early childhood curriculum: 'play and enjoyment in learning in all its forms stimulate imagination, insight, communication and the ability to think symbolically, as well as the ability to cooperate and solve problems.' Approaches such as practical laboratory sessions, fieldwork and other activities in class, different from sitting down and listening to lecturers, may be construed as 'playing' – trying things out, seeing what works and what does not, communicating and discussing observations, and cooperating with colleagues to solve problems. This 'play' for learning may enhance students' capability for a learning disposition. Budd (2019, p.159), for example, proposes play in Mathematics lectures to counteract the image of the subject as dull and boring. Shallcross and Harrison (2019, pp.145-156) suggest that public engagement activities are a method of 'play' which reignite university Chemistry students' love for the subject. Kothmann (2019, p.136) mentions student projects in Engineering curricula as 'a perfect time for play'.

Social relations, social networks and affiliation

The capability for social relations and social networks means being able to participate in a group for learning with others to solve problems and tasks, and even being able to form networks of friendships and belonging for learning support and leisure (Walker, 2006, p.128). Nussbaum's (2011, p.34) definition includes the freedom to live with and towards others and engage in various forms of social interaction. Students describe how they liked a community feel at school and some say that they miss this at college. *Feeling at home at school* succinctly describes the students' narratives about their school environment.

Luke (BEE1) describes the sense of community in the small Catholic boys' secondary school he attended. The sense of community and attention to students' needs, together with pedagogical strategies developed his capability to be educated, namely his motivation and interest in school subjects but also strategies, such as report writing, which helped him later on in his studies.

> "I liked everything really, especially when we worked on projects, bringing different subjects together on one project. One particular teacher used to teach us both Chemistry and Biology. He used to go beyond the curriculum and do lots of demonstrations. Even practical sessions. He taught us how to write proper lab reports. Other schools, even at the Junior College, they just have forms which you just fill in." (Luke, BEE1)

The fact that he declares to have "liked everything" about his secondary school speaks of a school where, at least in Luke's opinion, students' wellbeing and the capability for social relations and social networks (Walker, 2006, p.128) were given importance. Other students in this study also talked about the importance of good relations with their classmates and how this helps make the college environment conducive to learning.

A school activity which was mentioned during the interview with Matthew (BEE3) was a cycling 'marathon' in the school grounds. Matthew (BEE3) said that he spent three or four days and nights at school, in his words "an experience from which I learnt a lot".

Richard (BHS1) also mentions the importance for him of feeling part of a community. He laments what he sees as a lack of community feeling at MCAST since, he says, there is seldom any contact between students from different institutes. Martina (BEE3) also feels that a sense of community and taking part in extra-curricular activities helped her develop, although time off lectures seemed to have been resented by her classmates.

> "I don't think my classmates liked me. I set up a students' organisation, organised lots of activities with other students. I was excused from some lessons, when others did not get excused, so there was an element of jealousy. So, I didn't just do academic stuff but also alternative, extracurricular, which I feel are important because nowadays I use those skills and the relationships that I've built today as well." (Martina, BEE3)

Matthew's (BEE3) positive assessment of spending days and nights at school with his school friends and teachers for an event and Luke's reminiscing on social activities are examples of activities which help students develop the capability to live with and

understand others; in other words, the capability of social relations, social networks and affiliation (Nussbaum, 2011, p.34; Walker, 2006, p.128). Richard (BHS1), Matthew (BEE3), Luke (BEE1) and Martina (BEE3) all value a sense of community, belonging and affiliation. They see school and college as a place to connect with others and to make friendships.

Knowledge and imagination

The overarching theme of the capability of knowledge and imagination is the freedom and ability to gain knowledge of the chosen disciplinary or professional subject and being able to acquire knowledge for pleasure and personal development, for career and economic opportunities, for political, cultural, social action and participation in the world. It is the ability to used knowledge to understand Science and Technology in public policy and be aware of ethical debates and moral issues (Walker, 2006, p.128). Most students in my study focus on learning for career and economic opportunities. *Learning just what I need* could be a good descriptive theme for this attitude to knowledge.

Students seem to ascribe value to what they learn, with some exceptions, according to the utility of the subject to the world of work – *learning just what I need*. Students value the acquisition of what can be explained as real world and immediately useful knowledge, applicable to their chosen field or career. They make sure to contrast what they learn at MCAST with what they perceive as the lack of preparation for the real world at the University of Malta.

> "I was on a work placement at the Environment and Resources Authority. We learned about the European Waste Catalogue in class. When I told them that I know these things they were so surprised. They asked me how do you know these things? I said that we learn these at school. They started asking questions, we did them here at MCAST but in the Earth Systems course at the University of Malta they learn these things when they actually start working in the sector." (Anne, BEE2 FG)

This conversation amongst BCT2 students reveals their valuing of immediately useful learning or *learning just what I need*:

> "Some University [of Malta] students at the work placement [in a pharmaceutical company's laboratory] were better." (James, BCT2 FG)
>
> "And there are those who are hopeless." (Claire, BCT2 FG)
>
> "Not true, only the first years." (James, BCT2 FG)
>
> "Those who started with us did not know how to do anything." (Claire, BCT2 FG)
>
> "Then they should learn." (James, BCT2 FG)
>
> "We had already learnt pipetting techniques during the apprenticeship when we were doing the Level 4 course here. When I was in Level 4 I used to show the technique to second- and third-year University [of Malta] students."(Claire, BCT2 FG)
>
> "There was a certain tension between them [MCAST and University of Malta students]." (Paula, BCT2 FG)

The students see acquisition of knowledge as important but emphasise the putting into practice of that knowledge as an essential conversion factor for their employability (Walker and Fongwa, 2017, p.219). Students value work-readiness. According to Walker and Fongwa (2017, p.219), 'thick' participatory pedagogies, as well as theory-practice alignment through work integrated learning and internships, are also important conversion factors for the capability of knowledge and imagination, albeit narrowly construed as learning for work. Some students, in fact, see modules which are not directly related to their course of studies as extra; they feel that they have more than enough to learn. Since some students feel ill-prepared for the Engineering modules they study in their final year, they see modules in Mathematics as being more important than what they consider as modules not directly related to their discipline.

> "I find subjects like Anatomy really interesting. Professional practice is important, we are made to reflect, but that should come automatically. You cannot learn that; it cannot be imposed. How can you be forced to reflect? It's a waste of time." (Richard, BHS1)
>
> "Our course needs to change, I heard this even from my friends too. Maybe there should be more Biology; there are lots of opportunities for Biology and Chemistry. At the University of Malta, they have a BSc in Biology and Chemistry. There are also units which should not be semester-based, Inorganic Chemistry, for example. It really was too much, we still have an assignment pending." (Mary, BCT1)
>
> "I don't think we had enough optional modules to choose from. I chose Business. I would have liked Biology but there were no options, it's not fair. I chose Business to widen my options, to branch out." (Mary, BCT1)

> "When we came to the third year, they came with all these bombastic subjects, like Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Computer Programming. We came to these subjects, we never did them before and they expect a degree standard. We were not eased into the subjects. We had teachers who we were understanding, we managed. Maybe there should be more units to choose from." (Martina, BEE3)

Employers in the pharmaceutical manufacturing industry seem to confirm the views that MCAST students are better prepared for laboratory work. In a study by Thake (2018, p.178), employers said that University of Malta Pharmacy graduates are 'unfamiliar with the most basic apparatus' and that MCAST graduates employed as laboratory analysts are generally more comfortable with laboratory practices than graduates from the University of Malta. Students also value hands-on approaches as a teaching or learning strategy.

> "Placements are important for me. I like hands-on. You put into practice what you learnt in class." (John, BHS2)

> "There are placements, hands on, here. Compared to the University [of Malta] we have a lot of placement hours. They say that there it's more theory. I don't know, I've never been there." (Rebecca, BHS3)

> "Work placements are very important for me. I am a visual learner, and if I don't see a person working and doing something but just heard about it theoretically, I will go to the workplace and feel I don't know anything. Like this I learn how to do things." (Richard, BHS1)

The emphasis and valuing of immediately useful applications of knowledge is made obvious when students speak about lecturers passing on and discussing their professional and real-world experience in industry or in their field of study. The use of the term 'teachers' may also indicate students' valuing of guided and scaffolded learning, through which they are helped to cross the border from their world into the new world of their scientific discipline and acquire its language and shared understandings (Hodson, 1998, pp.100-102) rather than speaking over students' heads.

> "We have good teachers here at MCAST. They used to work in industry, in factories as well. You can give your opinions and examples from your previous work." (Christine, BCT3)

> "The best teachers I had were those who had experience in their subject area. They do not just dump videos and resources on us but vary the way they teach. Site visits, fieldwork. They speak from experience. Well I assume it depends on the subject. In Maths and Statistics, I don't see how they can speak from experience, it's abstract." (Matthew, BEE3)

Emdin (2010, p.19) mentions issues which can arise with hyper-strict curricula, which can be considered as a constraining conversion factor since it puts strict limits on what to teach and how to teach, with lecturers prevented from using their expertise. A chemist in industry, to engage students in new ways, may use students' interests and curiosity as a starting point for exploring the subject. A hyper-strict curriculum creates divides between students, teachers and the 'enforcers' of the curriculum such as administrators and management. Borg and Mayo (2006, pp.120-121) contend that the Maltese educational system is highly centralised and prescriptive. The preferred mode of teaching, at all levels of schooling, is, using Freire's phrase, 'banking education', with students being passive recipients of knowledge or information. They mention University of Malta students' note-taking while a lecturer delivers a 'sermon'. Some students in this study, however, saw note-taking and "copying notes off the projector screen" as a way to learn subject content. Some also mentioned the pacing of lectures and the good or poor sequencing of content by lecturers. While 'weak framing', in which students have greater control over their learning might suit students who have a good academic foundation, stronger framing in which the lecturer carefully guides and supports learning, pointing the way explicitly, may be needed to create access to knowledge for students who may have had little access to specialist expert or 'esoteric' knowledge and need help to access new types of discourse (Wilson-Strydom, 2017, p.73).

Hampered knowledge, because of lack of resources and lack of prior knowledge is touched upon by some students. Richard (BHS1) compares the academic facilities for degree students at the University of Malta and at MCAST. He laments the lack of comprehensive library facilities, especially the dearth of access to academic journals. The lack of dedicated HE facilities and the feeling that MCAST 'feels' like a school bothers Richard. Other students feel that the fact that MCAST offers lower level courses for students failing secondary school contributes to the colleges lack of prestige and perpetuates the perception that MCAST is not 'as good as' the University of Malta. A lack of dedicated facilities and

the lack of a 'university feel' seems to be also an issue faced by FE colleges which offer degree courses in England (Rapley, 2014). The capability for knowledge and imagination requires adequate resources, including access to academic journals. As mentioned earlier, other participants, namely BCT and BEE final year students mentioned final year modules such as Engineering for which they felt ill-prepared. Their agency and capability for knowledge is being hampered by lack of prior knowledge.

Despite my general feeling that students valued useful and instrumental knowledge most, *learning to take part in the world* was mentioned by some students. Some students, mentioned other interests and valued certain modules which are not directly related to their field of study, such as Critical Thinking. It seems that student choices early in secondary school and the messages they receive of the importance of choosing subjects which purportedly lead to specific careers, seem to lead to students to adapt their preferences to what is expected by their teachers and parents. Some of Gross and Manoharan's (2016) hospitality degree graduates appreciate liberal elements of the curriculum in retrospect. They suggest offering opportunities to students wishing to incorporate a larger liberal content in their curriculum to do so. Cerinsek *et al.*'s (2013) study suggests that lessons showing practical applications of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and laboratory sessions have a significant influence on the choice of choosing to study STEM subjects, increasing their self-efficacy beliefs. Female students are interested in careers with positive contribution to society; careers in which they help other people and careers in environmental protection and sustainable development. The Slovene STEM undergraduate students in the study wanted to do something interesting and fulfilling in their future careers. Some students see their chosen professional field as a way to contribute to society. Health Science students mentioned helping others, although they see their course as more technical than, say, Nursing, which involves more caring. Environmental students mention becoming more aware of environmental issues in the news, but still see the sector as full of employment opportunities, hence their choice of subject. The instrumental value of education, however, comes out the most.

> "Nursing is more, you know, there's more care to it. Ours is more technical. I like Nursing as well, but ours is still helping someone as well." (Rebecca, BHS3)

Christine (BCT3), although emphasising education as a route to a better, more interesting and preferred career, values education as expanding and developing her ability to *learn to take part in the world.* Richard (BHS1) and Martina (BEE3) also mention their interest in

current affairs, political action and social life. Walker (2006, p.128) describes the capability for knowledge and imagination as, amongst other things, the gaining of disciplinary and professional knowledge; being able to debate complex issues; and being able to acquire knowledge for pleasure and personal development. The ability have the confidence through education to exercise the right to political participation (Nussbaum, 2011, p.34), is clearly valued by some students. Luke (BEE1) sees education as a conversion factor for the expansion of capabilities, 'opening new roads' and developing one's capability for knowledge and imagination and also for affiliation (Nussbaum, 2011, p.34) by 'being a good citizen for those around you and yourself'.

> "Studying makes a difference, I don't wish to be ignorant on certain topics. Like being involved in politics; knowing what's happening around me. Studying also keeps you up to date with new technologies in the health sector. Education helps you keep up conversations." (Richard, BHS1)

> "Education is important to enhance life's experiences. It gives you an advantage in life but, then again, you find people with a PhD but no social skills. It should be a holistic education. Life at school cannot teach you happiness but it can teach you how to deal with stress, bureaucracy and how to deal with different people." (Martina, BEE3)

> "I like reading about things, not just Science. When you speak to people, you have to know what's going on around you. I also like Astronomy as a hobby. Education makes you a better person. You learn how to get along with different people." (Christine, BCT3)

> "I'm not really sure what I want to do when I finish my degree. Maybe something to do with ecosystem services, conservation and planning. I like habitat restoration and academia. I want to continue studying. Education opens new roads. Yes, there are people who didn't have an education and still managed to create new things. It depends on the individual. I think that a certain level of education is important to develop the way you think, to become a better citizen, for those around you and for yourself." (Luke, BEE1)

Environmental Engineering students (BEE2 FG) said that their course helped them become more aware of environmental issues and the policy making process in environmental public policy. *Learning to take part in the world* through active citizenship is also valued by some students. Education gives them confidence. Being confident to express an opinion could be developed through a classroom environment, in which students feel supported and encouraged to discuss, argue and consider complex issues (Walker, 2008).

Student narratives may reflect the messages they constantly receive at schools, that education is important for a good job. The capability of knowledge and imagination, seems

to a certain extent, to be valued in as much as it prepares students for a career. Students in this study value opportunities to develop themselves and to earn high incomes in secure jobs, although some also see their career as a way to help people and contribute to society. For some students education also gives them the confidence to *take part in the world*, and participating more fully in society, not just as workers.

Practical reason

The capability for practical reason is described by Walker (2010) in a 'thick' manner, explaining that it is a central capability, which is key to being able to rationally choose a life one has reason to value; to be able to navigate such choosing as a lifelong project; to make well-reasoned, informed, independent, intellectually acute, socially responsible, and reflective choices, and being able to construct a personal life project in an uncertain world. Wilson-Strydom (2016, p.155) and Topper (2019, p.25) describe a narrower version, that is of being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent and reflective choices about post-school study, career options, life decisions, and being aware of opportunities and taking advantage of them.

Scant information for informed choices emerges as a theme in much of the students' explanations of their choices of subjects in secondary school and later on in post-compulsory levels. Dylan (BCT2) seems not to have had much access to information on different opportunities available after completing secondary school. This seems to be a factor affecting Dylan's view of schooling as 'useless' in his teenage years. The teacher's role in stimulating interest in students who do not seem to be interested in school is central according to van Rooij *et al.* (2017). In their study of upper-secondary pre-university students in The Netherlands, they suggest that teachers should discuss with students what topics interest them most and weave in academic knowledge related to their topics of interest in their teaching. The structure of the school and the education system may, however, push teachers into teaching to the test, to rigid syllabi, ignoring in the process students' needs and interests, leading to a mismatch between students' interests and the way topics are taught in school.

In contrast, Luke (BEE1) says that he was exposed to a variety of subjects through after school clubs. The school, and the teachers teaching the subjects in an interesting manner,

increased Luke's agency freedom, and wellbeing freedom. Martina (BEE3) was dissuaded from choosing Science subjects, that is Biology and Chemistry. Even so, she already had Physics, as students have to choose at least one Science subject in secondary school. Martina chose Art and Accounts as her optional subjects. Probably feeling forced into choosing the subject, she failed her Accounts Secondary Education Certificate (SEC), also known as O- or Ordinary Level, examination. She said that she was told that Sciences are difficult. At fourteen years old, Martina felt that they were too young to know what it means "to become an accountant or a doctor", even though the school brought over professionals to give talks to students. The school seemed to focus on traditional, high-prestige professions such as doctors and accountants. Having failed Physics and Mathematics, compulsory subjects for access to the University of Malta's sixth-form college, called the Junior College and other sixth-forms, Martina chose, rather haphazardly it seems, to follow the one-year Probationary Officer Cadet course at MQF Level 3 (secondary school level) at MCAST's Maritime Institute. She also sat for her SEC Ordinary Levels Mathematics and Physics again.

Christine (BCT3), although achieving all the entry requirements for sixth-form, decided that she wanted to follow a Chemistry focused course at MCAST. She decided to enter into a lower level, Level 3, one-year diploma course and work her way up at the vocational college. Her subject choice at secondary school did not match her new and modified choices for further study, especially since she had never studied Chemistry. The limitations on subject combinations and the lack of information on what subject choices at secondary school might mean for post-compulsory course openings and options could also have affected Rebecca's (BHS3) agency negatively. In fact, she says that if she had known that Physics and Chemistry were important subjects for further studies, she would have chosen them. The capability for practical reason (Walker, 2010; Topper, 2019), of being able to reflect and make choices based on information and support at school seems to have been constrained. Some students find it difficult to make decisions, and the system, that is very specific entry requirements for some courses make navigating the system with regards to subject choice in secondary school very challenging.

Maybe the most talked-about issue was the choice of optional subjects in secondary school. Letting children study any combination of subjects at secondary school may broaden their horizons and introduce them to forms of knowledge which they had never encountered before. However, the students' stories indicate that, by the end of Year 8 (also known as

Form 2), they are not prepared and do not have enough information to choose the optional subjects they will study during their last three years of secondary school. Their choices may restrict their options of post-compulsory courses, since entry requirements may be very specific. Some, in fact, took Level 3 courses in subjects they had not studied in secondary school instead of accessing Level 4 courses directly. Interests and aspirations may develop over time, so the fact that the system allows for students to change subjects and track completely, albeit accessing post-compulsory education at Level 3 (a one-year long course) instead of moving directly to Level 4, still allows for students to exercise their agency. For some, this possibility is an important conversion factor to continue developing their capability to be educated.

Saito (2003) contends that letting children learn what they want 'may restrict the range of possible things which they might choose for their own sake: they might fail to learn about things which might also be included'. The restriction of a child's freedom temporarily may expand their options and choices later on in their lives. While the freedom to choose any combination of subjects in secondary school may be framed as increasing students' freedoms and thus expanding their capabilities, there seems to be a mismatch between what the students can choose in secondary school and what they can choose given their combination of subjects at post-secondary schools. Pinxten *et al.* (2012) posit that subject choice in secondary school may turn into a lack of freedom in that these choices may limit students' post-secondary choices. Rather than expanding capabilities, opportunities in Higher Education (HE) and in the labour market may actually contract rather than expand. Educational choices in post-compulsory education cannot be considered apart from educational choices in secondary school. The early choice of optional subjects in secondary school, and too narrow a combination of subjects in entry requirements for post-compulsory courses, affected some students' in this study.

Hart and Brando (2018) contend that effectively fostering children's freedoms and achievements in and through education includes structures for learner participation and empowerment; for equitable opportunities across diverse student bodies; to nurture learners' capabilities to aspire; and appropriate social and environmental conditions to support conversion of aspirations into capabilities. Students need support to develop the capability of practical reason. Allowing children to exercise freedom without support and guidance through appropriate scaffolding mechanisms would put their wellbeing achievement at great risk (Hart and Brando, 2018).

Cummings *et al.* (2012, p.5) warn against assuming students and their parents – especially those with a low socio-economic status - have low aspirations. They suggest a focus might be on improving opportunities and information rather than changing attitudes. Extra-curricular activities and school clubs, mentoring and caring teachers, discussing options for further education and subject choices are mentioned by students as factors which helped them flourish in school. A lack of information on the consequences of subject choice, and focusing on examinations and teaching to the test on the other hand obstacles to flourishing.

Bachelor of Health Sciences (BHS) students, while discussing their choices said that they liked Science subjects at school. Ruth, Roberta and Sarah said they watched documentaries and movies and played with toy microscopes. Ruth (BHS2 FG) said that she hated languages in secondary school. She said she would have chosen Pharmacy or Nursing at the University of Malta had she passed from her Advanced Level Chemistry. She adapted her preference to Health Science since she wanted something related. She said that being an athlete, health interests her. Choice is also affected by chance meetings with students who had already read for the degree. The preference for the practical aspect of Science is a constant theme amongst participants. It is cited as a reason for choosing Science-related courses.

> "I went to the Junior College [sixth-form] after secondary school. It wasn't fun there. Labs only once a week each subject, sometimes less. Lots of theory. After a year I was bored, so I said I'll try MCAST. What a difference! I knew an MCAST student studying the Advanced Diploma in Applied Science. And the fact that at Level 4 you are on apprenticeship, that I really liked." (Sandro, BCT2 FG)

David (BEE2 FG) had followed a Level 4 Culinary Arts course at the Institute of Tourism Studies. In his case, work placements made him realise that a job in the hospitality sector was not for him. He chose to move to MCAST for a Level 4 Environmental Sustainability course and then to read for the Environmental Engineering degree because 'the environment sector is a growing industry'. James (BCT2 FG) also had instrumental reasons for coming to MCAST. He accessed MCAST at Level 3, wanting to change to a Chemistry-based course. He had not chosen Chemistry in secondary school. On a school visit to MCAST he said that they told him that there is big demand for laboratory analysts and that salaries are quite good.

> "I know that I will have a job waiting for me. I don't want to go through all the stress of studying and not find a job." (James, BCT2 FG)

Other students said they chose to read for their degree at MCAST because it was the only option available to them given that Advanced Diploma qualifications are not recognised for entry to the University of Malta. Asked whether they would consider other subjects had they to start studying all over again, Business degrees were mentioned frequently. Statistics show, in fact, that 31.7% of graduates in Malta in 2016/2017 read for degrees in Business, Administration and Law, with the next most popular degrees, at 16.9%, being in Health and Welfare (NSO, 2019b, p.6).

The information available to students to be able to make informed choices seems to be scant or obtained serendipitously. The focus on pushing students to sixth-forms as a default seems to hinder some students from independently and rationally making up their own minds, although some make conscious choices, despite the perceived lack of prestige of following the non-academic MCAST route.

Practical reason – does 'prestige' trump reason?

The issue of 'prestige' of institutions comes up mostly when students talk about their post-compulsory trajectories and choices. Students also talk at length on their post-compulsory trajectories. The educational trajectories of students depend on the choices either the students make, or else are forced to make, due to, for example, parental pressure, or accessing different post-compulsory institutions depending on the examination grades obtained in the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examinations at the end of secondary school or the Matriculation Certificate (MATSEC Advanced and Intermediate Level examinations) at the end of two years at a sixth-form college[3]. Information on the

[3] SEC and MATSEC examinations are designed and managed by the University of Malta's MATSEC examinations board. The SEC examinations are taken at the end of the last year of secondary school that is Year 11 or Form 5. They are also known as Ordinary Levels. Students need at least six Ordinary Levels including Maltese, English, Mathematics and a Science subject to access the University of Malta's Junior College sixth-form. Additionally, to access the University of Malta they need to gain the MATSEC certificate consisting of two Advanced and four Intermediate Levels, one of which is 'Systems of Knowledge'. In contrast for access to MCAST MQF level 4 Advanced Diploma courses students can either work their way up through MCAST MQF level 3 courses or by obtaining four SEC Ordinary Level subjects. Degrees at MCAST can be accessed either through MCAST's MQF level 4 Advanced Diplomas or by obtaining two MATSEC Advanced Level and two Intermediate Level subjects, the combination of which depends on the degree.

capabilities that students value and conversion factors, that is what helps or hinders students to flourish, can also be elicited by examining their trajectory through the educational system.

Walther *et al.* (2015) helpfully describe five different types of student trajectories through the educational system, namely: smooth academic; discontinuous academic; smooth vocational; discontinuous vocational; remedial or intermediate. The 'smooth academic' trajectory is a linear trajectory from secondary school to an academic sixth-form. The 'smooth vocational' trajectory is the path from secondary school to vocational institutions, either because students prefer that route or because they adjust their preferences due to under-achievement[4]. 'Discontinuous academic' and 'discontinuous vocational' trajectories are discontinuous and involve changes in courses and schools because of constraints such as under-achievement, issues and/or conflicts at school, and other problems such as family and life issues. 'Remedial or intermediate' refers to trajectories of young people who access courses to improve their qualifications or 'parking lots'[5] for those who fail to enter regular education. Students accessing the vocational route through MCAST, whether through lower level second chance courses[6], or directly through the Advanced Diploma route after secondary school may progress to read for Bachelor's degrees at MCAST. The University of Malta generally is accessible only through academic qualifications. Students with an MCAST Level 4 Advanced Diploma are not granted access to University of Malta courses. Some students, having gained the necessary entry requirements for the sixth-form run by the University of Malta, speak about their time there and why they changed to MCAST either for their Advanced Diploma or to read for a degree. Interestingly, some choose MCAST in preference to the University of Malta, even if they have achieved the necessary entry requirements. The educational trajectories of students participating in this

[4] MCAST has lower entry requirements than the University of Malta or its Junior College for all courses at all levels, while offering courses at MQF Levels 1, 2 and 3, which neither the University of Malta nor sixth-form colleges do. An exeception is the state Higher Secondary school which offers SEC Ordinary Level revision courses at MQF Level 3 together with MATSEC Advanced and Intermediate Level courses at MQF Level 4.

[5] MQF Levels 1 and 2 at MCAST are remedial basic courses, roughly equivalent to the first three years of secondary school (Years 7, 8 and 9, also known as Forms 1, 2 and 3).

[6] MQF Level 3 courses roughly equivalent to the last two years of secondary school (Years 10 and 11, or Forms 4 and 5) give a 'second chance' to students who achieved two SEC Ordinary levels, or else give the possibility to students who, although achieving four or even more SEC Ordinary levels, wish to change their area of study. An example relevant to this study are students who did not choose Chemistry in secondary school but who wish to study Chemistry at higher levels. Some choose to spend an extra year at MQF Level 3 before proceeding to the Chemistry based two year Advanced Diploma in Applied Science at MQF Level 4.

study vary. The reasons for their choices, their agency during their trajectories and their valued beings and doings will be discussed below.

Social attitudes in Malta favour the academic pathway as the default choice for post-secondary students, albeit for those who get all the entry qualifications. The latest statistics available show that, in 2016, 2,059 or 64% of students who continued studying after compulsory education chose an academic sixth-form while 1,149 or 36% of students continued their education in the vocational sector (NCFHE, 2018, p.8). In the same year, the Secondary Education Certificate examination board report shows that 2,130 students obtained the required six subjects to access sixth-forms (MATSEC, 2016, p.78). These statistics clearly indicate that students who achieve the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) in six subjects, including the compulsory Maltese, English, Mathematics and one Science subject, usually opt for a state sixth-form college or the more prestigious University of Malta-run Junior College or a very selective church school sixth-form. It is pertinent to point out that the Advanced and Intermediate Level examinations studied for access to the University of Malta, consisting of two Advanced Level subjects and four Intermediate Level subjects, known as the Matriculation certificate (MATSEC) and also the end of secondary school SEC examinations are designed and controlled by the University of Malta. Probably this control has led to the academic route leading to access to the University of Malta being considered as the most desirable route of post-compulsory education.

As stated by some students earlier on, the structure and the institutional habitus of secondary schools and sixth-forms seem to favour learning by rote and the regurgitation of 'knowledge' during formal examinations at the end of secondary school and sixth-form. Such teaching to the test and transmission type teaching seems to be deemed necessary for success in SEC and MATSEC examinations, which are required to access the University of Malta (MfEE, 2017, pp.28-29). While the academic routes of post-compulsory education seem to be clear, with students and probably their parents being familiar with academic qualifications and institutions, the vocational route is 'confusing and complex' (MfEE, 2017, p.56), with little clear and accessible advice on the vocational option. Societal expectations seem to push students towards academic sixth-forms, with other paths perceived less favourably. *Prestige* in students' preference for the academic sixth-form route seems to *trump practical reason*. Kevin, Paula and Elena (BCT2 FG), for example, said that their first choice was the Junior College, and only moved to MCAST to follow the

Level 4 Advanced Diploma in Applied Science after failing some examinations. The report by the Maltese Ministry for Education's working group, entitled *The Working Group on the Future of Post-Secondary Education* (MfEE, 2017, p.115), in fact, states that even though some students at academic sixth-form colleges would have preferred more hands-on courses at MCAST, they worried that MCAST lacked the prestige or status required or perceived by peers, parents and employers. This lack of relative prestige can be seen as a constraining conversion factor affecting some students' agency. They do not choose what they value because of societal perceptions.

Vos and Ballet (2018, p.553) describe the French system in which students, after the end of compulsory education, choose the type of post-compulsory *lycée* to attend. Similar to Malta, the option that is considered the most prestigious may also pressure students to study subjects that they do not feel comfortable with (*ibid.*, p.567). As the following quote illustrates, the choice to continue post-compulsory education at the University of Malta's sixth-form, the Junior College, seems to be the default and expected option for some students.

> "I passed all necessary examinations and so went to the Junior College after secondary school. There were teachers who taught with a certain passion but somehow, I lost interest. We had lots of consecutive lessons in the same subject, say Biology, parts of the syllabus were taught by different teachers, one lesson after another. It was really difficult to concentrate and very tiring." (Luke, BEE1)

Some students' wellbeing agency seems to be constrained, with students adapting including and their parents and peers, favour most. Consecutive fact-laden lectures seem to have made Luke (BEE1) decide to change sector and read for a degree at MCAST. The conversion factor, in his case, seems to be the perceived difference in the structure of courses at MCAST.

> "I looked at the MCAST prospectus and I liked the work-experience aspect, so I chose to follow this degree here. I could have gone to the University of Malta, in fact, I had the general entry requirements, but the courses on offer there did not interest me." (Luke, BEE1)

One of the conversion factors affecting Luke's decision to choose MCAST over the University of Malta is the work placement. Morrison (2008) describes post-sixteen

vocational education students in travel and tourism, who identify themselves as 'practical' rather than 'academic'; valuing 'experience' more than 'qualifications'. Luke's emphasis on a more hands-on approach seems to fit this description. Luke's trajectory may be said to be discontinuous academic/vocational (Walther *et al.*, 2015). The factors inducing this discontinuity is his late realisation that he prefers a more hands-on, contextualised approach to learning.

The prestige of the Medicine course at the University of Malta pushed Richard (BHS1) to follow the academic route and try for the good grades needed for the doctor's course. Lauri *et al.* (2011) mention how students who are dead set on joining the Medicine course in Malta sometimes choose the Pharmacy course if they do not obtain the more stringent entry requirements, with a sizeable number abandoning the course in the first year because they feel they did not make the right course choice. They also point out that most students who do not get into the Medicine course do not choose the closely related Nursing course, probably because of the lack of prestige of Nursing. Even though he could have accessed other courses related to healthcare at the University of Malta with lower grade requirements, Richard decided to abandon sixth-form altogether. The teaching to the test seemed to put him off the style of teaching at the Junior College, leading to an abrupt change in his educational trajectory.

> "After secondary school I went to the Junior College. I chose Biology and Chemistry at Advanced Level and Physics, Psychology, English and the compulsory Systems of Knowledge at Intermediate Level. I liked it at the Junior College. I matured there, mixing with both girls and boys. We were only boys at my secondary school. Teaching is good there, but certain teachers just talked about their dog and their wife, wasting time. Well I did not sit for the Advanced and Intermediate Level exams and stopped in the second year and came to MCAST to follow the Pharmacy technicians' course. I wanted to study Medicine, that's why I went to the Junior College, but it was difficult to achieve the good grades at Advanced Level to access Medicine at the University of Malta. I needed at least a grade B in Chemistry, and it was difficult. I would have got a C in Chemistry which is not enough." (Richard, BHS1)

Mary (BCT1) seems to have had the same reaction as Richard (BHS1) after failing to reach an educational goal. Although her academic performance at sixth-form seems to have been good, the fact that she did not get a place on her preferred University of Malta degree course due to severe restrictions on the number of students made her change trajectory completely. Discontinuity in trajectory is forced by structural constraints and

disillusionment, although Mary seems to be able to adapt to the circumstances. She could have chosen other health-related courses such as Nursing but decided not to. Her trajectory may also have been affected by the lack of conversion factors, in this case, the combination of subjects she chose at Advanced Level, may have worked against her, reducing her agency and restricting her options. In fact, on deciding to change trajectory, given that she did not have an Advanced Level certificate in Chemistry, Mary could not access other Science courses at the University of Malta, nor could she access the degree in Chemical Technology at MCAST. She decided to work her way up from the Level 4, Advanced Diploma in Applied Science. Structural constraints forced Mary to adapt her preferences and try another route (Walther *et al.*, 2015).

> "I went to the Gozo state sixth-form after secondary school. I have two Advanced Levels in English and Biology. In fact, I had all the requirements for the University of Malta, but since I wanted to read for a degree in Midwifery, and they only accept the best thirteen students who apply, I did not manage to get in. I was the fourteenth on the list. I was so angry that I decided to forget all about University. My mother suggested the MCAST Level 4 Advanced Diploma. I wanted to change everything including subject, so I decided to follow the Level 4 course. My mother commented that I was changing completely from Biology to a Chemistry-based course, but that's what I wanted." (Mary, BCT1)

Her change of plans did not seem to dampen Mary's resolve to study, however, showing that she developed resilience. An important conversion factor seems to be the support of her family. The pedagogy used at MCAST may also have been a conversion factor helping her to decide to stay on at the college.

Martina's (BEE3) trajectory was surely not linear and is probably one of the most complex trajectories in this study. Having failed the compulsory SEC examinations to access the University of Malta-run sixth-form, the Junior College, she joined the MCAST maritime probationary officer cadet course because she liked boats since her father owned one. Martina then realised that a life at sea, away from her family was not for her. She retook the examinations that she had failed and decided to go to the Junior College to study Biology and Chemistry at Advanced Level and other Intermediate Level subjects with a view to having a go at the prestigious Medicine course at the University of Malta, even though she had never studied these Sciences at secondary school. She said she was doing well but changed her priorities after she got pregnant. Following the birth of her child and having worked a couple of years, she decided to join the MCAST Advanced Diploma in Applied Science course, after which she continued at MCAST reading for the Bachelor's

in Environmental Engineering. Life circumstances and misinformed educational choices make her trajectory discontinuous and complex (Walther *et al.*, 2015).

While policies may present general and vocational post-compulsory schools or colleges as equally valid options for students, society may implicitly and also culturally see the general route as self-evident. The culture and way of learning in academic sixth-forms are familiar to students through their years in compulsory education, with vocational education being less familiar (Brunila *et al.*, 2011). Some of the students changed college, from an academic one such as the Junior College to a vocational one. Some students claimed that their parents pushed them to choose an 'academic' sixth-form, such as the University of Malta's Junior College, over a vocational college. Others moved from sixth-form to MCAST with doubts on whether it was the right move. They mentioned familial and societal negative perception of vocational college. Brunila *et al.*'s (2011) Finnish study also suggests that middle-class young people from educated families go to 'general upper secondary' rather than 'vocational upper secondary'. The general school is more prestigious and the obvious choice for middle-class students and their parents. Students in Walker and Fongwa's (2017, p.209) study value accessing high status universities. Similarly, Atkins and Flint (2015) quote British students expressing the view that society perceives vocational programmes as of lower value than academic programmes. The lack of prestige of MCAST is mentioned repeatedly by students. Some attribute this lack of prestige to the fact that MCAST offers basic and foundation courses for students with no or minimal qualifications.

> "With hindsight I wouldn't change MCAST for the University of Malta now. In Gozo, the perception is that MCAST is for failed students since the MCAST Gozo campus offers mostly the lower level courses for those who fail secondary school. In Malta it's different." (Mary, BCT1)

Perceptions of friends, parents and siblings, as well as what students perceive employers want, impinges on their choice. The theme of *who is really choosing?* is pertinent here. That some parents in Malta push their children to choose what they are familiar with, that is sixth-form colleges, was evident from the interviews. Students, however, felt that they needed to justify their choice, and like the students in Kiprianos and Christodoulou's (2015) paper defended vocational schooling because of its different teaching style and the perceived advantage it confers in the job market. The perception of MCAST is described succinctly by Rebecca (BHS3).

> "When you tell your friends that you go to MCAST there is this kind of stigma. Even at work in hospital, other health professionals, if they get to know you're from MCAST and not the university, they sort of give you a look. I think the reason is that MCAST has courses at lower levels, like, with no entry requirements, so students come here with, like, nothing, but we are reading for a degree, but they don't seem to understand that there are courses at different levels here. I don't feel university students are better than me but, in reality, the perception is that if you are a university student, they look at you better." (Rebecca, BHS3)

Blackman (2017, pp.13-14), writing about the United Kingdom, says that it is regarded as normal that students try to avoid universities that are less selective, even though there are no systematic differences in teaching quality and the likelihood of completing or obtaining a good degree classification, once students' socioeconomic background is taken into account. The reason for the negative perceptions being snobbery and discrimination. Boliver (2015) contends that while there are large differences between the United Kingdom's older universities and former polytechnics in terms of research activity, academic selectivity, economic resources and social mix, the difference with respect to teaching 'is much more minor'. The indication is that the difference is mainly in perceptions and prestige. Heil *et al.* (2014) state that the prestige of American colleges or universities, and higher entry requirements seem to neither help nor harm an individual student's chances of graduating. The teaching quality does not seem to depend on the prestige of a university or college.

A conversion factor which helped some students decide to continue their post-compulsory education was their experience of low-level work, such as a waiter, as a supermarket shelf-stacker or as a fast-food server.

> "Without a degree you would be a waiter all your life. I like catering, in fact I've been working as a waitress for the past five years. I like it, you meet people. But a degree gives me the option to do other things. It doesn't mean I will stop working as a waitress but if and when I want to change jobs, I can." (Mary, BCT1)

> "I don't want to be a waiter my whole life. The fact that I worked part-time as a waiter, it's hard work, and that was a factor in my decision to continue my studies." (Dylan, BCT2)

> "I always worked part-time. I didn't want to beg my mother for money to go out. You learn a lot from work. Some students do not want to work at McDonald's or at Lidl [supermarket chain]. You learn a lot, teamwork, how to deal with people. But it isn't easy work and it's not interesting at all. I wouldn't want to spend my whole life stacking shelves. I used to finish work at midnight or one in the morning at Lidl, and this made me want to study so that I wouldn't get stuck in this type of job." (Christine, BCT3)

Payne (2003, p.13), on reviewing research on choice at the end of compulsory schooling explains that decisions are taken with incomplete information. Christine (BCT3) mentions one school visit as helping her decide. Choices may be based on how a particular option affects a person's self-esteem, on pre-existing beliefs and attitudes, or how easy the choice is in the short-term. Individuals may seek to satisfy their needs for prestige or economic status. Christine (BCT3) seemed not to mind the lack of prestige of vocational education. It may be the case that students or parents with a middle-class background are more preoccupied with issues of prestige. Dylan (BCT2), Mary (BCT1) and Christine (BCT3) seem to have an instrumental view of education, seeing school as a means of obtaining qualifications which will help them find employment or gain access to higher education (Payne, 2003, p.17). They value work which they perceive as more satisfying than the low-level jobs they have or had. They see higher education as a conversion factor for improving their job prospects, for the capability of employability and the capability of valuable work. Education, and specifically vocational higher education enhances their wellbeing freedom in that it gives them clear career options and work which is satisfying and better than their part-time jobs, or indeed the jobs that their working-class mothers and fathers have. Together with their own job experience, their parents' class positions may push some students to strive for change rather than social reproduction (Lehmann, 2009).

Working-class parents may also, despite lack of information and knowledge about educational opportunities push their children to succeed and access good jobs. According to Lehmann (2009) education is seen as a path to social mobility, hence the choice of utilitarian or vocational degrees than say the humanities.

> "My father doesn't know how to read and write, but he encourages me to study. He's very happy that I'm studying for a degree. My former boyfriend, his parents made fun of him when he was worried about exams, they used to tell him that his efforts were in vain because he wouldn't graduate. My father, he used to come up to my room and ask me what I was studying. He tells me, if you need something for your studies, just tell me and I'll buy it for you. They used to pay for private lessons when we were in secondary school, they wanted us to succeed." (Christine, BCT3)

> "I didn't get any SEC Ordinary Levels, you don't need them for Level 2 courses at MCAST. However, I decided to continue studying. People from guidance and counselling had spoken to us and they encouraged me to continue studying. They told me that there are lots of jobs out there in the Sciences. I had Physics at school, I liked it, but I had a failing grade in the subject. Both my mother and father encouraged me to continue studying." (Dylan, BCT2)

Hart (2018, pp.631-632) refers to the processes which may expand or contract the capabilities of learners. The ecosystem of processes may include whether teachers are flexible and adaptable to the needs of the learners and ready or, indeed, able to co-construct curricula, assessments and learning activities with the learners themselves. Parents may hinder or help the take-up of educational opportunities by learners according to their values motivations and priorities. Learners may also expand their capabilities 'with the sacrifice of a degree of well-being freedom or achievement on the part of others' (Hart, 2018, p.632). Examples are parents adjusting their household spending to help pay for educationally related material and equipment, as mentioned by Christine (BCT3) above; teachers working extra time to help students with academic matters; and academics forfeiting some of their time to meet student needs. Walker (2019) also mentions conversion factors such as teachers' high expectations of students and assistance by a parent when it comes to subject or course choice. School visits to post-compulsory colleges and information accessed through a student's school, such as Dylan's (BCT2) meeting with guidance teachers are also enabling conversion factors. Even though Dylan had failed secondary school, the encouragement and information provided by his school offered a path to expansion of his capabilities through further education. MCAST, as an institution, offers entry points at various levels including at foundation level for students failing secondary school. This is an important enabling conversion factor for some students who would be otherwise lost to the system. Even students from a working-class background can demonstrate significant agency and determination (Walker, 2019), even after failure.

The enabling conversion factor of parents and siblings (Wilson-Strydom, 2011) is also discussed by Mary (BCT1), Richard (BHS1) and Rebecca (BHS3). Michel-Schertges (2015, p.78) describes the 'sibling effect' were the siblings' choice of education and occupation strongly influences students' choices.

> "My family is very supportive. I know a colleague in my course whose mother doesn't encourage her at all to continue studying; it's demotivating. My family are supportive, even if I take bad decisions. They guide me but let me take my own decisions. You learn from mistakes after all." (Mary, BCT1)

> "My older brother had studied at MCAST. That's how I heard about the college. I am the youngest of six siblings. I didn't want to be the least qualified of my brothers and sisters. Most of them have degrees." (Richard, BHS1)

Christine (BCT3) consciously decided to change trajectory after successfully completing secondary school. With a SEC Ordinary Level in eleven subjects she could have chosen the default route for high achieving students, an academic sixth-form such as the Junior College.

> "I only had Physics in secondary school, I didn't choose Chemistry and Biology. They used to tell me, why are you going to MCAST? You were so successful in your O-Levels (SEC). MCAST is considered as the college for those who failed. What I liked about MCAST is that you can move upwards step by step. I could have joined the Junior College, no problems at all. But there you choose two A-Level subjects [and Intermediates] but you're still unsure whether you'll succeed and what you'll become eventually. Yes, I spent a year in the Applied Science Level 3 course, it's as if I repeated a year of secondary school, but I wanted to do Chemistry and Biology, so I had to do Level 3." (Christine, BCT3)

Christine's (BCT3) choice to continue at MCAST seems to stem from her view on education as preparation for a career. MCAST courses gave her an identity as a laboratory analyst from day one, unlike the more general academic courses at the Junior College which are focused on preparation for access to the University of Malta. She felt that the trajectory at MCAST was clearer, it took her step by step to a good career. Christine displays individual agency and resilience despite societal pressures and expectations, although she may have made a gendered subject choice in avoiding the 'masculine' Engineering subjects.

> "I could have chosen Business or IT, but we came to MCAST on a school visit and the Applied Science course interested me. My brother got an HND in Mechanical Engineering from MCAST, but he discouraged me from choosing Mechanical Engineering, they're all boys there." (Christine, BCT3)

Students' reasons for the choice of degree is mainly vocational. When speaking about which modules they prefer, students mention preferring modules directly related to their field of study and their chosen career (Gross and Manoharan, 2016).

> "I am studying because I enjoy it but, at the end of the day, I need a job, so I will not start studying something knowing that, at the end, I will not find a job." (Martina, BEE3)

The future, work and the 'good life'

The theme emerging when discussing work and life in the future is *working to live well*. Discussing the future with participants in this study brought up various valued functionings or 'beings and doings'. Their future working life was discussed, as were their life goals. Tiwari (2018, p.426) lists various capabilities valued by Indian middle-classes, these include the financial means to own a house; access to information about higher education careers; the means to support a family; owning a car; and traveling for leisure. These are also valued by the students in this study. Specifically, students mention their wish to be able to live, travel and maybe work in other countries. Continuing to study, and owning a house and a car, and setting up their own family is also mentioned by some students. Their aspiration seems to be to become their own persons and, in some cases, get away, even if temporarily, from Malta, a very small, relatively isolated, island state. They may see traveling as enhancing their freedom, and work as an enabler of their wellbeing freedom.

Gender and work

Working to live well for female students seems to clash with the expectations of society, some specifically mention their mothers' concern with their choices of higher study. The capability for work or employability and its intersection with being female came up in the focus group discussion with BCT2 students. Maybe unsurprisingly, it was only female students who brought up and discussed the issue. Gender and social expectations become a conversion factor affecting their capabilities and functionings. I was rather surprised by their comments. As a male, although I had worked for years in industry with both male and female colleagues, it did not cross my mind that some females still feel the tension between

a career and family so deeply. Elena, Paula and Claire (BCT2 FG) agreed that there is an expectation for them, females in their early twenties, to 'settle down, get married and have children'. They, however, see their future differently and are adamant that they travel to expand their horizons, have a good well-paid career and pursue further study. They insist that families do not have the same expectations of boys. They value a career as an opportunity to use their knowledge and skills acquired through HE.

> "I don't know; I do not plan long term. Not thinking of getting married yet. If I need to study and learn something else after this degree, I'll do that. It's not only qualifications in life; I know someone who worked his way up from the production line to manager. But the more you learn, I think, the better. You'll have an advantage over others. I like traveling. If the factory where I worked in summer gives us opportunities to go and train for some weeks in India, well, I would go for it. I won't want anyone to stop me. I think families have this expectation of their daughters, they'll study, settle down, get married and have children." (Claire, BCT2 FG)

> "Yes, I agree with Claire, there are these expectations of girls. My mother is really worried that I'm twenty-one, and according to her I don't want to settle down and marry. You don't get the same expectations for boys. In the private sector if you stop for two years because of children you'll end up losing your job. I think you study to prepare yourself for work. You learn other things along the way. It opens your options. I don't want to think about family and children just yet. I want a career." (Paula, BCT2 FG)

The traditional Maltese conservative Catholic view of the family and women's caregiving role (Camilleri-Cassar, 2017) seems to create a tension between female students and their older mothers. In what may be perceived as a less conservative country Australia, girls also seem to conform to some extent to traditional gender roles. McDonald *et al.* (2011) in a study about the expectations for the future of three hundred ninety-three Australian fourteen- to sixteen-year-old students find that girls expect to sacrifice career opportunities by working part-time or leaving the labour market altogether, to take up primary care-giving and domestic tasks. For the young men, the status quo of gender relations was largely uncontested. Half of the girls in the study saw their lives as juggling between successful and demanding, mostly professional careers, and their traditional gendered roles. The female students in my study all mention careers and family life as intertwined. Mary (BCT2) qualifies marriage and children in the future with a 'maybe', and mentions the struggle of her parents, bringing up a large family on only her father's income. Rebecca (BHS3) mentions getting married and having children as a life goal.

> "A good life is a happy life. Having a good relationship with my family. Maybe having children, getting married. It means looking back and saying, I lived my life to the full. I didn't have boring work. I had a job I liked. Going abroad also widens your horizons. A good life doesn't mean not making mistakes. Mistakes help you, help you learn. My mum and dad, they brought up seven children, it was really hard. Only my father works. They say they had ups and downs in life. And struggles which helped them improve. They are still happy." (Mary, BCT1)

> "I would like to get married, hopefully, and have a family. Well, I don't really have long-term plans, day by day and we'll see." (Rebecca, BHS3)

There is a variety of opinions amongst the female students, with some adamantly asserting that they did not study to end up as housewives and others seeing marriage and children as a valued 'being and doing'. The tension between a career and having a family is made clear by Christine (BCT3).

> "My wish is to have a family and my own children. But I still want to work. What's the point of studying and then abandoning everything? I cannot imagine myself staying at home, I would go crazy." (Christine, BCT3)

Some male students also mention 'settling down' and having their own house and family as a goal, although for them this goal is not in tension with career goals. Others, male and female, say that they take life one step at a time and have no firm plans, but mention their wish for agency and freedom to do things they value. They see a good income and a job that does not affect too much the other spheres of life as enabling conversion factors.

> "I have nothing planned. Getting married? Don't know. I have a car already, it's fine. The important thing is that you advance. I wish to get to a point where I don't depend on anyone. Not necessarily self-employed, but a manager or something. My own boss." (Kevin, BCT2 FG)

> "After I finish college I want to travel. Barcelona or somewhere in Spain. Most of my family lives in Malta, but my brother emigrated to Australia. I want to go live somewhere in Europe. I like Malta, I'll miss it. But I want an adventure, I don't want to get to fifty years old and regret that I didn't work abroad for some time. Maybe I'll do five years abroad and then come back and continue studying." (Richard, BHS1)

> "I want a job that leaves time to study for a Master's, or something else. I think you would be better off financially after doing a Master's degree. And there is also personal satisfaction. I think personal satisfaction is important. If you are not happy with what you've achieved and studied, it would be difficult to be motivated on your job." (Luke, BEE1)

In a study on Australian university students' goals Weier and Lee (2016) find that most female students aspired to traditional adult roles, with more than 90% of female students wanting to get married, to have children and to be in paid employment. Even in my study, all female students, even those mentioning children and finding a life partner as their valued goals, still value a satisfying career. The tension between being female, aspiring to settle down and having children, and a satisfying career seems to still be unresolved.

Valued work and employability

Working to live well for Kevin (BCT2 FG), as quoted above, means having autonomy at work. He aspires to be his own boss. Work can sometimes be perceived as encroaching on one's freedom to be and do valued things. His statement indicates that he values a job in which he can take decisions and has the autonomy to shape his own work. Richard (BHS1) and Luke (BEE1) value the capability for work. A good job for them is one in which they can take decisions, leave time to travel or time for them to pursue other interests, Richard's statement about adventure and work is interesting. He sees getting away from Malta as a valuable goal, at least for a period of time.

> "Life is different from school, I mean life treats you a lot worse than school. At work if they tell you to work overtime, you cannot refuse. At school if you do not feel like going, you just don't go." (James, BCT2 FG)

> "A good life for me is that I am not stuck in the same place. I want to advance in my studies, but I don't want to spend ten years in the same [hospital] department. I want to move from one department to another. If I stay in the same place, I'll go crazy. You can increase my salary, but I'll still want to move." (Richard, BHS1)

Lehmann (2019) describes how some graduates struggle with the development and mobilisation of social and personal capital in the search for employment. Instead, they largely rely on formal job postings and trust in the value of their human capital. Some participants discussed mandatory internships and placements that took place during their education, and how these assisted them in the development of networks and social capital for career advancement. Students emphasised how their work placements during their studies gave them a leg up in finding employment, with some students being offered jobs while still studying. James (BCT2 FG), however, sees work as affecting his agency and other spheres of his life, lamenting forced overtime.

Walker and Fongwa (2017, p.67) discuss the capability for employability, focusing on the conversion factors to achieve this capability, such as access to good schools and universities, social networks, work experience and internships. They seem to assume that graduate work is valued work in and of itself. Leßmann and Bonvin (2011) discuss 'valued work' as a capability and functioning. In the capabilities approach work must be valued, otherwise it is not freedom-enhancing. Students have no reason to value bad conditions of work. The conversion factors necessary for the capability for work are resources, that is the income form work; and personal and social conversion factors. Decent remuneration, however, may depend on long hours at work or work intensification, as well as bad work conditions. Personal conversion factors include qualifications and technical know-how, together with the ability to work in teams, to communicate and the ability to balance demands from private and professional life. If the skills, knowledge and competencies a worker has are specific to a particular employer, then the capability for work is very limited. Transferable knowledge, technical know-how and competencies enhance a worker's capability for work. Social conversion factors include the quantity, accessibility and quality of available jobs. Job quality can be assessed by measuring the extent to which a job interferes with other aspects of a person's life, and also by examining how a job contributes to human flourishing by considering the content of work such as skills, competencies, degree of autonomy and responsibility, and hourly productivity. Participation in decision-making, or at least the consideration of the views of workers in decisions also contributes to 'valued work'. The type of work students aspire to is interesting work and work as a means to live a better life. Good pay, maybe not surprisingly, when so much depends money, from buying a house or apartment to pursuing leisure activities, is an aspect of work which students mention frequently. Personal growth is also mentioned by some students. Work is seen, to a certain extent as instrumental: to provide the resources to live well.

> "Well, my aspirations take me in a different direction from my studies. I want to start a business. It's a bit of pie in the sky. Studying helps me grow as a person." (David, BEE2 FG)

> "There are those who do not find work related to their studies. It doesn't worry me. If I find better work, with better pay, better conditions, I'll have a better life, so I'll just go for it." (Anne, BEE2 FG)

> "The important thing for me is that I have a good job. Settled, with my own house and eventually my own family. That's it. I did not stop at Level 4 [Advanced Diploma in Applied Science] because I don't think that you can achieve everything [at work] if you stop. Experience helps, but a degree gives you a further advantage." (Dylan, BCT2)

Students seem to agree with the view that a degree, and higher degrees such as Master's, represent more than just technical skills. A degree is seen as showing employers that they are resilient since they have been through education at higher levels, have studied various complex concepts, are self-starting and can work individually, together with being more professional, reliable, and able to meet deadlines (Tholen, 2017, p.53). Some students mention the importance of meeting deadlines for assignments and how this prepares them for the world of work.

> "School teaches you time management, structure. Not necessarily only academic stuff." (Kevin, BCT2 FG)
>
> "Oh, come on! No, it doesn't." (James, BCT2 FG)
>
> "It does, just compare a person who went through school, he doesn't have to be an intelligent person, but he'll be more organised. That's how I see it." (Kevin, BCT2 FG)
>
> "Now if you start an assignment one day before the deadline, that's your problem." (Claire, BCT2 FG)
>
> "And you still have to do it." (Kevin, BCT2 FG)

Gesthuizen and Verbakel (2011), in their study on job preferences in Europe, found that educational attainment, income and the quality of the job, that is autonomy and occupational class, positively influence intrinsic job preferences; while educational and attainment negatively influence extrinsic work values. Manual workers proved to value extrinsic work values the most from all occupational classes, more than mangers, professional workers and office workers. Self-worth and self-satisfaction are the direct results of having a worthy task to perform. Job satisfaction of working women is said to be higher than that of non-working housewives doing housework (Gini, 2001, p.46). Job satisfaction increases with job enrichment; when workers participate in decision-making; with workers' perception of personal development through work; when workers are able to set their own work goals; and with flexitime. Satisfaction decreases with role ambiguity, with role conflict and with high job turnover rates (*ibid.*, pp.45-46). The excerpt from the

BCT2 focus group below reveals some conversion factors which enable or constrain the capability for work or 'valued work'.

> "I didn't do my homework at school, here you have three weeks to do your assignments. You have to get it ready." (Claire, BCT2 FG)
>
> "Well, it's different at work." (Paula, BCT2 FG)
>
> "Work things stop at work, when you go home you don't think about work." (Claire, BCT2 FG)
>
> "Well, no, that depends on the person." (Paula, BCT2 FG)
>
> "That's how it should be, while you're at school, even at home you have school things to do." (Claire, BCT2 FG)
>
> "If you're an analyst, yes, but if you're managing it's different." (Sandro, BCT2 FG)
>
> "My father [who manages a company] tells me that if he doesn't shut down when at home he wouldn't sleep at night. You have to separate work and life, you need your sanity." (Claire, BCT2 FG)

Claire (BCT2 FG) speaks about how college made her learn the skill to stick to deadlines, one of the skills which may support the development of the capability for employability. The subsequent discussion then turns to what the students see as valued work. The valuing of work which allows a net distinction between working time and family or leisure time is clear, as is the realisation that this may be a difficult thing to achieve because of the nature of available work or because of a person's propensity to worry about work. The conversion factors in this case may be the availability of jobs and careers with a decent work-life balance. Anne (BEE2 FG), like many students wants, to continue studying at Master's level, seeing education as a means of self-development and also as means to gain an advantage in the labour market. However, she sees work as getting in the way of studying. Work may impinge on other spheres of life, as also claimed by Daniela (BEE2 FG). She sees education as a path to a good career; the career, however, might get in the way of family life and further study.

> "Work can get in the way of studying. A full time, forty-hour week job, I don't think I'll manage to work and study at the same time." (Anne, BEE2 FG)

> "I want to find work related to my studies, not something completely different. Something I which I am happy. And maybe if MCAST offers Master's degrees maybe I'll consider continuing my studies. But not immediately after I graduate. I will choose MCAST because I am used to the place, I like it here. I think the more time passes, education becomes less of a priority. With a family it will be difficult to balance family, work and studying. I think it's best to study as much as possible when you're young." (Daniela, BEE2 FG)

Apprenticeships, during their Advanced Diploma course, and work-placements during their degree studies are valued by students. The capability of employability is developed through the conversion factors of the links the college develops with industry and state agencies such as the state general hospital and the state environment agency, and theory-practice alignment (Walker and Fongwa, 2017, p.219). Through working and collaborating with other people at work they developed social networks and their confidence. The confidence of being able to apply learning, including through practical hands-on learning, in class, in laboratories and through fieldwork, to real-world contexts. Wellbeing in career choice may be achieved if the potential capabilities available to people are expanded (Robertson and Egdell, 2018). In terms of careers this may mean providing access to career opportunities through placements and apprenticeships, providing information in schools on a wide range of opportunities rather than pushing students to traditional, prestigious careers and in the process implying that other careers are less desirable. There is a danger that those providing career information may impose their own views on what are the most valued outcomes (Robertson and Egdell, 2018). Some students in this study, in fact, speak of schools bringing in accountants and other professions considered as prestigious, such as doctors, to hold career-related talks, as if, for example, the only valued outcome for Science students is Medicine. In a conservative, more traditional society some careers, especially the traditional professions, may still be perceived as more prestigious than others.

A theme emerging from discussions with students, particularly BHS students, is that of a *yearning for a professional identity*. In the Health Science (BHS) students' focus group, the lack of professional identity as 'clinical physiologists' was discussed. It was felt that their course may be too generic. A student contrasted the situation in Malta with that of

England, where she spent some months on an exchange programme. The profession, according to the student, is recognised as a health profession in its own right in the English National Health Service[7]. Professional identity seems to be an issue for these students. They lament that sometimes they are confused for nurses by other professions in the state hospital where they spend their placements. The professionalisation of their particular professions means that employees with the health service, who were trained in-house, see these degree-holding workers, as some kind of threat to their job conditions and as 'newbies' who get better conditions of work even though they have much less experience than them. A degree usually means starting your career on a higher salary than others with lesser qualifications. The development of a professional identity, making their work more 'valued', seems to be hampered by institutional and social conversion factors. On the one hand, there still does not seem to be a clear career path for BHS students. On the other hand, recognition of experience by long standing healthcare technicians, which BHS students seem to be trained to eventually replace, needs to be tackled to remove obstacles to the integration of BHS graduates into the hospital workforce. Role ambiguity in certain newer health professions, such as paramedics, and the reluctance of health professionals to break out of their silos and acknowledge the importance of the work of other professionals is an issue discussed in the literature (Meerabeau *et al.*, 2008; Williams *et al.*, 2015). Professional isolation of these newer professions may lead to conflict with other, more established health professions, such as with doctors and nurses (Williams *et al.*, 2015). Health Science students mentioned how doctors sometimes did not acknowledge them and looked down on them because they came from a vocational college, not to mention that they confused them with Nursing students. Access to 'valued work' or the capability for work, in the case of Health Science students is being constrained and hampered by the institutional climate and inter-professional rivalries in the state health service. The issue of professional warrants was also brought up by Chemical Technology students during a focus group discussion (BCT2 FG), with some saying that the course should have been a warranted Chemical Engineering course, revealing that they value societal recognition for their profession.

[7] Clinical physiologists in the UK, according to the Registration Council for Clinical Physiologists, are healthcare workers 'who are involved in diagnosis and management of a wide range of conditions'. The disciplines in the profession are audiologists, cardiac physiologists, gastro-intestinal physiologists, neurophysiologists, respiratory physiologists and sleep physiologists (RCCP, nd).

Concluding thoughts on the 'good life'

Good relationships at school, college and after completing education and the ability to act autonomously are valued by students, although family ties remain important. The valuing of autonomy (Nussbaum, 2011, p.34) comes out clear in students' valuing of having their own home, having meaningful relationships with significant others, with their families and also with colleagues at work. Some students mentioned positive experiences at work-placements abroad through the European Union's Erasmus+ programme[8] and how other workers helped them learn new skills and involved them in work and social activities. They also mentioned different work cultures and how they valued traveling and getting to know other people and countries, learning to take part in the world. An important conversion factor in the case of traveling, living and working abroad is Malta's membership of the European Union.

> "What I want to do with my life, well surely I won't work in Malta, although I cannot exclude that really, there are various agencies, organisations and NGOs in the environmental sector. It can be a mix of abroad and here. I need an experience outside Malta, more than a Master's or PhD, I want experience in the sector. If it's ornithology, you have to have some experience, either doing research. Before coming up with your own research, you have to work in a department or group. I want to work in conservation. I wish to go to the UK or Sweden, habitat management. Ecosystems, it need not be strictly ornithology. There is also the possibility that I go the USA, something on birds. But then there's my family and personal relationships, I would prefer somewhere in Europe. Eventually, I think I'll end up back in Malta… It is not easy to define what a good life is. Being happy, that's very important. Well, I think that one has to deal with both successes and failures. I didn't do well in my Advanced Levels, obviously I am not happy about that. But I gained a lot of experience, contacts and networks… A good life also means that I can live independently. That's why I want to go abroad to be independent. I still feel responsible to help my family with any issues which crop up, however." (Matthew, BEE3)

> "A good life, for example, if I don't feel like cooking tonight, I have the resources to go out to eat." (David, BEE2 FG)

[8] The European Union's Erasmus+ programme finances, amongst other things, traineeships and study periods in Europe with organisations or HE institutions. Over three million students benefited from the programme over the thirty years since its inception (Erasmus+, nd).

> "In life you'll always find obstacles, of that I'm sure. Personal things like health, family, losing your job for whatever reason. A good life for me is taking things day by day, and as far as possible having a stable job. Make most of the moment. Education helps, I think. There are those who have no formal education but have experience. But I think education helps you know what you are doing, understand your work more. I worked as a waiter and I decided I want something better. Less hard work for more pay." (Andrew, BEE2 FG)

> "You start slowly, working after finishing your degree. You put money aside, travel. Save money to buy a house, a car." (James, BCT2 FG)

Figueiredo de Barros (2015) reports that Portuguese college students, even if the country is caught up in an economic crisis, value self-fulfilment and personal development. Similarly, the students in my study see work, or rather, income from good work as a means to pursue other life goals, from Matthew's (BEE3) goal of traveling and gaining experience in his favourite discipline, ornithology, to simply having enough income to have the freedom to eat out. Education is also seen as increasing agency for James (BCT2 FG). Traveling abroad and getting away, even if for a short period of time, may be related to living in an island state in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea and the fact that students live with their parents. Gaining autonomy is not simply moving from the town or village to another town, given that the distances in Malta are so small. The most valued aspect for a 'good life' after completing their degrees seems to be autonomy (Topper, 2019), which can be achieved through being educated. Valued work, which does not reduce students' agency freedom is also valued; it is seen as a conversion factor for the 'good life'.

Students gave a rich and varied account of what they expect or get from education and what helps or hinders their wellbeing achievement. In the final chapter I will bring all the strands together and answer the research questions set out in Chapter Four directly.

Chapter Six - The 'good life', education and work: a conclusion

The students' contributions to this study meandered through their experience of compulsory education, mostly that of secondary school; their choices, free or constrained, for post-compulsory education; and their experience at college reading for Bachelor's degrees in Chemical Technology (BCT), Environmental Engineering (BEE) or Health Science (BHS). Students also spoke about their aspirations for the future and their views on work and the 'good life'. In this chapter, I bring together all the strands and weave a conclusion by answering the research questions informed by the interpretation of the data in Chapter Five. My concluding thoughts are my interpretation of student voice. Their lives and experiences are surely more complex than captured in this dissertation. However, my interpretation rests on my own experience both as a state school and university student, as a former worker in the pharmaceutical industry, as well as a teacher in a private secondary school, and as a lecturer at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) for the past seven years. It also rests on my readings of academic literature on technical and vocational education, Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE), and the application of the capabilities approach to these.

The research questions are the following:

Research Question 1 - What is the students' conception of the 'good life' and what do they have 'good reason to value' (Sen, 2001, pp.74-75)?

Research Question 2 - What opportunities do they feel education is offering them to develop their capabilities; or what constraints do they think they have in achieving their vision of the 'good life'?

Research Question 3 - What is the students' take on the prevalent human capital discourse on education? (MCAST, 2015) While the college emphasises 'preparation for work' – how do the students see themselves? How is their choice of subjects related to their vision of 'the good life'?

While the research questions have been answered extensively throughout Chapter Five, in this chapter each question will be answered succinctly and directly. Research Question 1 is the overarching question, which will be answered throughout all sections in this chapter. Research Question 2 will be answered in the discussion below about the capabilities and associated themes emerging from the data. The constraints and conversion factors which hinder or help students achieve wellbeing or capabilities particularly in education, will be discussed. Research Question 3 will be answered particularly in the sections relating to the capability for knowledge and imagination, that of practical reason and the capability for

work. The discussion about the capability for work will include a synthesis of the findings on students' views on education as preparation for work or for life and associated conversion factors for the capability for work. A discussion and reflection on the findings' implications for my practice as a professional in Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) at MCAST will follow. This chapter will be concluded with a discussion about further research and this research's limitations.

Perceptions of the 'good life'

As described in Chapter Four and discussed in Chapter Five, the interview and focus group data collected for this study, was examined for themes, with the themes grouped into overarching themes, specifically the capabilities that students mentioned. Table 6.1 below shows the capabilities emerging from the data, as well as their associated themes. The table is followed by a description of the findings of this study, one capability at a time.

Capability (overarching theme)	Associated themes
Respect, dignity and recognition	English as a language of exclusion; 'negative relationships with teachers'; 'misfit students'.
Learning disposition	Supportive teachers; lost in huge impersonal classes; playing to learn.
Social relations, social networks and affiliation	'feeling at home at school'.
Knowledge and imagination	'Learning just what I need'; 'hampered knowledge'; 'learning to take part in the world'.
Practical reason	Scant information for informed choices; prestige trumps reason; 'who is really choosing?'.
Work (valued work)	'Working to live well'; 'yearning for a professional identity'.

Table 6.1 – A summary of the capabilities emerging from this research and their associated themes.

Respect, dignity and recognition

This capability is described by Walker (2006, pp.128-129) as being able to have respect for oneself and for and from others, treated with dignity and not being diminished or devalued because of one's personal characteristics, beliefs or status, such as class, gender and

religion. It includes having a voice for effective participation in learning. The themes grouped under the 'umbrella' of this capability emerging from my data included *English as a language of exclusion*; *negative relationships with teachers* and *misfit students*.

English as a language of exclusion was mentioned by some students who attended Catholic secondary schools. The ethos of these schools, at least according to some students, was to project an image of schools for the children of professional elites. Students from other backgrounds were expected to reinvent and remould themselves into this new identity. A closely related theme is *misfit students* – together with the use of English, to mark out who is different, even if unconsciously, the emphasis of some schools on preparation to pass examinations with the highest grades possible purportedly as preparation for students to access certain specific professions, such as medical doctors for students studying Sciences, made some students feel left out and misfits. Another student at a state secondary school found the rigid routine of siting down and listening to lesson after lesson, taxing. His admission that the "good students" were taught in separate classes seemed to have confirmed his conviction that he was "not good for anything". The assumptions of the structures in place made him a deviant misfit who refused to adapt to the norms. Here, the availability of a second chance route through the lower levels of MCAST and a serendipitous talk by a school adviser seemed to convince the student to actually continue his studies. How many others are lost to the system because of inflexibility and teaching to rigid curricula? Bullying by classmates upon changing schools as makes one student unhappy. The student had found herself becoming a 'misfit' when moving from a private English-speaking school to a small Catholic-nuns' school, were most students spoke Maltese. Here it is also the use of English as a mark of prestige by some schools which affected an English-speaking student who moved to a school where students spoke the native majority language. The cultural difference affected her negatively. The student narratives pointed to the need of conversion factors, such as schools nurturing a welcoming accepting environment at school, instead of the heavy focus, as emphasised by some students, on grades and examinations, to make the school look 'good' to the outside world, risking making students hate learning in the process (Deprez and Wood, 2013, p.150). It also points to the need for a school language policy which respects students' identities and avoids creating artificial social differences based on the former colonisers' exclusive use at school. The reference by a student to *negative relationships with teachers*, creating a toxic atmosphere in class, emphasises the centrality of the teacher as a conversion factor, other than the system as a whole or particular policies, for the development of the capability for respect, dignity and recognition.

The development of the capability of respect, dignity and recognition may mean that schools and policy makers need to move away from a human capital view which ignores the process of teaching, the culture of the school, and the social life of students and teachers (Unterhalter, 2009, p.212). It may also mean eschewing the subsuming of education to market values which may lead to a culture of teaching to the test and memory work (Giroux, 2015, pp.1-2), making some students feel alienated, unrecognised, and disrespected in a school environment which favours students which fit in to the norms and expectations of the system. The system as the 'oppressor' demands that the students, 'the oppressed', adapt to it (Freire, 2000, p.74), instead of students participating with others in determining their actions and the conditions of their actions in the learning process (Young, 2011, p.5).

Learning disposition

The most mentioned factor affecting students' willingness and interest in learning is a supportive environment in the classroom, namely *supportive teachers*. Students showed that they wanted to learn when the conditions in the classroom were conducive to learning, when lessons were fun, when teachers or lecturers discussed, laughed, and in some ways were friendly with them, *playing to learn*. Sitting down in a classroom for multiple consecutive lessons or lectures made students lose interest.

The feeling of being *lost in huge impersonal classes* also came up. Students, particularly those who at some point during their educational trajectory had attended an academic sixth-form, namely the University of Malta's sixth-form called the Junior College, felt that their ability to develop the capability for a learning disposition suffered due to feeling just one of the many, unable to cope and keep up with the lecture-hall style, content heavy teaching. The system at the institutions they mentioned militated against piquing their curiosity and interest in learning. The impersonality and anonymity of the set up made them give up, to some extent, on learning.

A variety of teaching methods which students saw as playful and interesting seem to be preferred. From acting out parts of a play in English literature, to going on field trips and doing things with their hands. *Playing to learn* seems to be an important aspect in developing the capability for a learning disposition.

Social relations, social networks and affiliation

The theme identified in the students' narratives related to the capability for social relations, social networks and affiliation is *feeling at home at school*. Students value a sense of belonging, of camaraderie with other students and with their teachers, of *feeling at home at school*. They value feeling welcomed, comfortable, confident and included, and reminisce about social activities, sleeping over at school for an event, taking part in school clubs and activities, and making friends who mutually support each other. A range of activities seems to help build a community at school or at college also seem to be valued by students. A focus on just competitive sport activities, for example, may make some students left out, as may school clubs focused only on academic subjects. A student laments the lack of community feel and meeting spaces at MCAST, pointing to seeing value in the college experience as not only a place of formal learning but also as a place to build friendships and networks, and the importance he attaches to nurturing a sense of belonging at the college. Positive relationships with fellow students in class and lecturers were also touched upon. A study in Italy (Vieno *et al.*, 2007) found that social bonding and network formation in schools promote wellbeing and self-efficacy in adolescents. As discussed in Chapter Three, Deneulin (2008, p.114) while applying the capabilities approach to societies, argues that 'structures of living together' help individuals to flourish. Halpern (2005, pp.79-80), from a social capital point of view, argues that social connections such as relationships and friendships contribute to wellbeing.

Knowledge and imagination

The themes subsumed under the umbrella of the capability for knowledge and imagination are: *learning just what I need*; *hampered knowledge*; and *learning to take part in the world*. It seems that students have internalised the policy discourse (MCAST, 2015, p.24; NCFHE, 2015, p.27) that emphasises education as preparation for work. The message in schools also seems to be drilling to get the all-important grades for access to more prestigious academic sixth-forms and eventually the University of Malta and to be able to access courses for prestigious professions such as medical doctors for students choosing Sciences in secondary school. The message is not to study to widen one's horizons, or for the love of knowledge but to *learn just what I need* to get through examinations and to be best prepared, in terms of good grades, for work. Although some employers seem to prefer

students with hands-on, practical experience, teaching to the test to memorise facts for examinations is ironically seen as more of value in the more prestigious institutions and in some schools. As Deprez and Wood (2013, p.145) contend, it seems that through the bombarding of students with the message that marketable knowledge and skills are the most valuable, educational institutions risk just producing graduates 'who know how to 'do' what the workplace needs but who do not know how to 'think' in order to live a meaningful life'. Students are, it seems, pushed to choose their optional subjects early in secondary and by post-secondary education have to adapt their preferences because of those early choices. It could also be assumed, with the risk of extrapolating too much from my data, that the probable lack of exposure of students to learning for the love of knowledge, and knowledge or subjects considered or perceived as 'useless' for their future careers, also lead students to adapt their preferences and learn to desire what they are socially constructed to want. For example, an education with instrumental value and the imparting of marketable knowledge and skills at school or college (*ibid*., p.146). School and college are primarily seen as preparation for a career. For all students in this study, subject and course choice are based on their perceived 'usefulness' as door openers for their future careers. While students' preference for 'useful' knowledge and subjects points to an internalisation of policy messages and discourse based on the human capital theory, which according to Unterhalter (2009, p.212) is not interested, amongst other things, in curriculum content, the process of teaching, the culture of the school and the social lives of students and teacher (*ibid.*, p.207), students in this study still attach importance to a school and college experience which is interesting, fun, in which they feel they are not just numbers but respected members of a welcoming community. Although work is seen as necessary for the 'good life', they want work which respects their individual autonomy, is interesting and above all gives them the resources and possibilities to pursue other interests in life, enhancing their wellbeing.

The emerging theme of *hampered knowledge* refers to the perceived lack of dedicated HE resources for students to further their knowledge at degree level. This points to a tension at MCAST between its role as a second-chance Further Education college and a college offering advanced technical diplomas, higher diplomas and degrees. Some students feel that this tension contributes to the college's lack of prestige and perpetuates the perception that MCAST is not 'as good as' the University of Malta. Some students also felt that a conversion factor hampering the development of their capability for knowledge and

imagination is lack of prior knowledge and preparation for advanced modules in their degree courses, such as a better grounding in Mathematics.

Despite the general emphasis on instrumental knowledge, the theme *learning to take part in the world* emerged from some of the students' narratives. Some students did show interest in current affairs and politics, and in how education gives them the confidence to express their opinions. Health Science students mentioned helping others through their careers. Environmental students mention becoming more aware of environmental issues in the news.

Practical reason

The emerging themes grouped under the capability for practical reason are *scant information for informed choices*; *prestige trumps reason*; and *who is really choosing?*.

Students' reference to the process they followed to make educational choices sheds light on the conversion factors which enable or constrain the capability for practical reason, that is being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent, and reflective choices about college, career and life decisions, as well as being aware of opportunities and how to take advantage of them (Walker, 2006, p.128). The theme *scant information for choice* emerges through students' description of schools, which rather than giving information on the various possibilities and choices available in post-compulsory education, push students towards choosing subjects that are deemed to eventually lead to prestigious career choices. The choice at the end of Year 8, also known as Form 2, of subjects to be studied in Years 9, 10 and 11 of secondary school may restrict student agency and freedom for valued post-compulsory choices.

Rigid institutional characteristics, such as early subject selection procedures, may impede some students' capability formation. Bonvin (2019, pp.281-281) suggests alternative pedagogies involving 'more progressive step by step ways of learning for people needing more time to acquire knowledge and skills' and the importance that the system recognises less 'prestigious' skills or qualifications as valuable. One solution could be either a more general education for all in secondary schools, with subject choices pushed to post-compulsory education, while another would be to avoid over-specific entry requirements for post-compulsory institutions.

Post-compulsory courses could also be spread over a longer period of time, say an Advanced Diploma course over two and a half academic years instead of two or introducing foundation years to Bachelor's degrees for those who prefer or need a gentler, less intense experience. Hyper-strict curricula putting limits on what teachers or lecturers teach, and how to teach, may also hamper students' capability development (Emdin, 2010, p.19). At MCAST, lecturers are provided with detailed grading criteria, with marks assigned to each criterion limiting lecturer agency on assessment methods. This may encourage teaching to the test, stultifying the development of students' critical capacities.

Most students, with some exceptions, seem to go along with the flow and try to access the more prestigious institutions, maybe because that is what their families and friends expect. *Who is really choosing?* Students mention support from parents or lack of support by some of their friends' parents, leading them to consider abandoning their studies. The 'sibling effect' in some students' choices is also pertinent to point out. The academic route is clearly the default option for most of the students in this study. *Prestige trumps reason* in post-compulsory institutions of first choice and in secondary school in subject choice which presumably will lead to prestigious careers. Some students in fact may have had to adapt their preferences, in that they could not access the University of Malta, which is sometimes considered as more prestigious by the students themselves.

Work (valued work)

The capability for work focuses on the nature of work itself, specifically that which does not diminish a person's wellbeing or 'good life' (Leßmann and Bonvin, 2011). In the capabilities approach work is freedom-enhancing, described in this study as the theme *working to live well*. Students value work with good remuneration to provide the resources to live well. They do not value work which is intense such that it impinges on other areas of life. The ability to balance demands from private and professional life is important to students. Students aspire to interesting work, and work as a means to live a better life. A degree of autonomy at work is seen by some as important for the 'good life'.

Working to live well for female students clashes with the expectations of society, particularly their mothers' concern with their choices of higher study. The traditional Maltese conservative Catholic view of the family and woman's caregiving role (Camilleri-Cassar, 2017) seems to create a tension between female students and their older mothers.

However, the students in this study do not seem to be adapting their preferences to conform to expectations, pointing to a break from the more traditional views of the role of females in society.

A theme that emerged from the focus group with BHS students is that of *yearning for a professional identity*. These Health Science students lament a degree of professional isolation of their newer healthcare-related profession (Williams *et al.*, 2015). Valued work is work in which they are treated as professionals like the more traditional health professions, such as nurses and doctors. Health Science students feel that the capability for work is being constrained and hampered by the institutional climate and inter-professional rivalries in the state health service.

While students feel that college supports them to translate employability into meaningful work (Walter and Fongwa, 2017, p.55), they value work which does not impinge too much on other spheres of life, particularly since they value traveling and leisure, as well as the time for furthering their education through higher degrees. The ‘good life’ meant having a fulfilling career through meaningful work which gave them enough resources to pursue other interests.

Implications for practice

The capabilities and themes identified as important to students have implications for my practice as a lecturer. My journey during this professional doctorate in education and in the process of researching and writing up this dissertation made what was a somewhat abstract concept and process of becoming a reflective teacher something tangible and which could be aimed for. It highlighted the importance of the day-to-day things in my practice and in the students’ everyday life, not necessarily tied to the subject content I teach or students’ actual time ‘being taught’ in class.

I became more aware of the need to build a relationship with students and offer them different and varied opportunities to learn, particularly that which Pym (2017, pp.187-188) suggests: ‘students will learn about what they practice’. Offering a range of opportunities of guided practice has become a more important aspect of my professional practice. The diversity of learning methods enriches all students’ learning experience. Pym (2017, p.188) suggests authentic case studies, project-based learning, discussions on why a particular answer to a problem is unacceptable and incomplete, giving students the opportunity to

construct their own sample test problem, and opportunities for them to teach a portion of material to the rest of the group, amongst other things. Rushing through content is not conducive to learning, as students themselves have recounted in this study. Offering different opportunities for learning is my way of showing that I acknowledge students' needs and of respecting and recognising their individual identities.

Through the course of the doctorate and the research for this dissertation, particularly my use of the capabilities approach, I feel that I have become more conscious of the fact that each student is different, that students are not a homogeneous group. It drew my attention to the fact that instruction material in English may disadvantage certain students and that the language of Science needs 'translating' to scaffold students' learning rather than assuming that terms particular to the discourse of specific disciplines are straight forward and immediately understandable. As Pym (2017, p.189) suggests, promoting student-student and staff-student interactions may be 'the best predictors of positive student outcomes'. The lecturer or teacher need not always be the best positioned person to promote learning, 'many students learn best from students who can explain new information using language that is more understandable' (*ibid.*).

The issue of education as just teaching content to make students good workers has been in my mind throughout this study. The policy emphasis on education for careers and work has been a running theme throughout this study. Personally, I would like to think that I could try to, in a small way, alter my practice to introduce some aspects of an education for 'public-good professionalism' (Walker, 2015). She calls for pedagogies and institutional cultures in which Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) students 'reflect and deliberate on the reasons and values upholding their professional agency', and their freedom and power to act in society, and question societal norms and values. Making explicit connections between knowledge, skills, and real-life issues makes knowledge more meaningful to students (Sugiono *et al.*, 2018), while developing their capabilities for knowledge and imagination, for a learning disposition and for practical reason. Shulman and Fenstermacher (2008, p.x) describe practical reason as reason directed towards action and state that knowing the facts does not imply knowing what to do in particular circumstances.

It is suggested that practical reason in university Human Biology, for example, is cultivated through discussing difficult bioethical issues (Sullivan and Rosin, 2008b, p.150).

Meanwhile, Engineering, and students of other scientific disciplines, could follow a module considering the history of technical professions and how technology was and can be used and misused (Sullivan and Rosin, 2008b, pp.162-176). Health Science students could follow modules on medical humanities, such that students' understanding of the patients they come into contact with is strengthened. Such a curriculum could help students become ethical and empathic healthcare professionals, help them recognise the power they will have as health professionals, and help them better understand patients' stories and develop a critical appreciation of practice (Murray *et al.*, 2000; Jones and Verghese, 2003). Environmental Engineering students could be engaged in community projects, improving for example, the environment of urban areas and engaging with communities providing and interpreting, for example, air quality or water quality data and campaigning for policy changes to improve air quality and the urban environment (Colón-Rivera *et al.*, 2013). Chemical Technology lessons and modules could be connected to sustainability issues, to appreciate the environmental consequences of pollution and how to prevent environmental damage (Fisher, 2012). Ethical, political and social issues connected to the pharmaceutical industry could be explored too. This is not to suggest that students are not discussing the society/science nexus and ethical issues in their respective professions, however, from my observations, such engagements are few and far between, probably a consequence of rigid curricula and an institutional emphasis on preparation for work in the narrow sense of the word.

The 'good life'

In this dissertation I looked at the issues affecting students' perceptions of the 'good life', ranging from their experience in compulsory and post-compulsory schooling, to life at college, to choices during their educational trajectories, and to how they see themselves after completing their degrees. Schools and other educational institutions can contribute to the 'good life' by providing the conditions for students to learn in an environment in which they are respected and to build mutually respectful relationships with their peers and with teachers and lecturers. Schools can make sure that they provide access to information which helps students make reasoned choices in life. Outside school, however, the 'good life' entails work which provides the resources for the participants to raise a family or pursue other interests like traveling and having their own home. Their families provide the support structure which helps them and encourages them in their educational trajectories;

this support seems to be a central enabling conversion factor to students in this study.

The issue of the lack of prestige of the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) seems to still linger at the back of some students' minds, although some emphasise their practical skills as giving them an edge over University of Malta students. Constraints mentioned include content heavy curricula, learning by heart at academic sixth-forms, and schools which give up on students who do not learn in the traditional way, that is sitting down and listening or the transmission mode of teaching. Enabling conversion factors included information about alternative trajectories after secondary school rather than just the academic sixth-form trajectory, teachers who made learning fun, playful and interesting, and the possibility of progressing through MCAST starting at lower levels depending on prior achievement.

Experience of low-level jobs seems also to have pushed some students to decide to further their education after secondary school. After completing their degree, students envisage the 'good life' as having interesting work. Some female students insist that they want to apply their knowledge through a meaningful career, although they claim that there are expectations on them to get married and have a family. Others see experience abroad as necessary for their conception of the 'good life'. Students, however, are adamant that work is just one sphere of life, speaking of work as possibly interfering with leisure, further study and other interests. Work placements and apprenticeships are seen as enabling conversion factors, helping students decide what type of job they would like, learning how to work with others, and enabling networking. Students from Health Science, Chemical Technology and Environmental Engineering seem to have similar aspirations, with the Health Science students in particular emphasising the importance of professional identity in a healthcare setting. The 'good life' for students is having the autonomy to live the life they value. For some, this means having their own family, for others it means traveling, furthering their studies and having their own home. The freedom to be able to do the things they value and having the resources to pursue their valued 'beings and doings'.

Limitations and further research

This dissertation focused on the perceptions of the 'good life' during and after degree students' time in education. The students participating in this study were studying Chemical Technology, Environmental Engineering and Health Science at the Institute of Applied Sciences at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). This study did not count, quantify or classify the different opinions students expressed, instead it sought to understand how their perceptions of the 'good life' are influenced by the society they live in (Sen, 2001, pp.144-145): their experience of different schools, society's perception of the schools and post-compulsory institutions, peer pressure, familial expectations and their previous successes and failures all affect and shape these perceptions.

These students' trajectories through the system can be deemed a success since they managed to read for a degree. This 'success' may also affect their perceptions of the 'good life'. Further research might consider exploring the valued capabilities and the perception of the 'good life' of former MCAST students who decided not to read for a degree. Students in this study often compared themselves to University of Malta students, further research might explore the differences, if any, in the perceptions of the 'good life' and their aspirations for the future of students from both MCAST and the University of Malta. The difference in attitudes and perceptions of the 'good life' and the attitudes to education of private, Catholic school or state-educated students may also be an interesting further line of research. Students choosing to read for degrees in different subject areas, other than STEM and Health Science, may have different outlooks and perceptions of education and of the 'good life'. As an example, students studying Creative Arts or sports at MCAST, or female students studying Engineering or Building and Construction, could give different perspectives and value different aspects of life, such as work, leisure and valued 'beings and doings'.

Although the rhetoric in policy and public discourse about education seems to affect students' views on education as preparation for work, their perceptions of the 'good life' point towards students who perceive education as a path towards secure and interesting careers that give them stability, status and the resources needed to truly lead a 'good life', rather than the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake.

References

Allais, S. (2012) ‘ˈEconomics imperialismˈ, education policy and educational theory’, *Journal of Education Policy*, 27, 2, pp.253-274.

Alridge, D.P. (2015) ‘The ideas and craft of the critical historian of education’, in A.M. Martínez-Alemán, B. Pusser and E.M. Bensimon, eds, *Critical Approaches to the Study of Higher Education: A Practical Introduction*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp.103-129.

Alvesson, M. (2011) *Interpreting Interviews*, Kindle edition, London: Sage.

Andresen, S., Otto, H.U. and Ziegler, H. (2010) ‘Bildung as Human Development: an educational view on the Capabilities Approach’, in H.U. Otto, H. Ziegler, eds, *Capabilities - Handlungsbefähigung und Verwirklichungs-chancen in der Erziehungsweissenschaft*, 2 ed, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, pp. 165-197.

Atkins, L. and Flint, K.J. (2015) ‘Nothing changes: perceptions of vocational education in England’, *International Journal of Training Research*, 13, 1, pp.35-48.

Aultman, L., Williams-Johnson, M.R. and Schutz, P.A. (2009) ‘Boundary dilemmas in teacher-student relationships: struggling with “the line”’, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25, 5, pp.636-646.

Avis, J. (2017) ‘Beyond competence, thinking through the changes: economy, work and neo-liberalism’, in M. Mulder, ed, *Competence-based Vocational and Professional Education: Bridging the Worlds of Work and Education*, Switzerland: Springer, pp.183-202.

Ball, S.J. (2013) *The Education Debate*, 2 ed, Bristol: Policy Press.

Baptiste, I. (2001) ‘Educating lone wolves: pedagogical implications of human capital theory’, *Adult Education Quaterly*, 51, 3, pp. 184-201.

BCT (nd) ‘Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Chemical Technology’, URL = https://www.mcast.edu.mt/courses/as6-01-19 (accessed 26/07/2019)

BEE (nd) ‘Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Environmental Engineering’, URL = https://www.mcast.edu.mt/courses/as6-02-19 (accessed 26/07/2019)

BHS (nd) ‘Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Health Sciences (Physiological Measurements)’, URL = https://www.mcast.edu.mt/courses/as6-03-19 (accessed 26/07/2019).

Blackman, T. (2017) *The Comprehensive University: An Alternative to Social Stratification by Academic Selection*, Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute.

Boliver, V. (2015) ‘Are there distinctive clusters of higher and lower status universities in the UK?’, *Oxford Review of Education*, 41, 5, pp.608-627.

Boni-Aristizábal, A. and Calabuig-Tormo, C. (2016) ‘Enhancing pro-public-good professionalism in technical studies’, *Higher Education*, 71, 6, pp.791-804.

Bonvin, J.M. (2019) 'Vocational education and training beyond human capital: a capability approach', in S. McGrath, M. Mulder, J. Papier, R. Suart, eds, *Handbook of Vocational Education and Training: Developments in the Changing World of Work*, Switzerland: Springer, pp.273-289.

Borg, C. (2017) 'Governing structures in Malta's Higher Education: A drive towards managerialism?', in M.T. Vassallo, C. Tabone, eds, *Public Life in Malta II: Papers on Governance, Politics and Public Affairs in the EU's Smallest Member State*, Malta: Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy, University of Malta, pp.265-295.

Borg, C. and Mayo, P. (2006) *Learning and Social Difference: Challenges for Public Education and Critical Pedagogy*, Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers.

Borg, C. and Mayo, P. (2015) 'Malta: an overview of European influences on educational reforms', in T. Corner, ed, *Education in the European Union Post-2003 Member States: Education Around the World*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp.171-192.

Bourdieu, P. (1986) 'The Forms of Capital', URL = https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu-forms-capital.htm (accessed 26/6/2019).

Bowles, S. and Gintis, H. (1975) 'The problem with human capital theory - a Marxian critique', *The American Economic Review*, 65, 2, pp.74-82.

Bozzato, E. (2014) 'The contribution of Critical Discourse Analysis to the Capability Approach in education policy analysis: The case of Kosovo', in H.U. Otto, S. Shäfer, eds, *New Approaches Towards the 'Good Life': Applications and Transformations of the Capability Approach*, Oplanden: Barbara Budrich Publishers, pp.33-51.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 2, pp.77-101.

Brighouse, H. and Unterhalter, E. (2010) 'Education for primary goods or for capabilities?', in H. Brighouse, I. Robeyns, eds, *Measuring Justice: Primary Goods and Capabilities*, Kindle Edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, locations 2662-2952.

Brunila, K., Kurki, T., Lahelma, E., Lehtonen, J., Mietola, R. and Palmu, T. (2011) 'Multiple transitions: educational policies and young people's post-compulsory choices', *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 55, 3, pp.307-324.

Budd, C. (2019) 'Sketch: playful maths', in A. James and C. Nerantzi, eds, *The Power of Play in Higher Education - Creativity in Tertiary Learning*, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.159-161.

Bukoye, O.T. and Shegunshi, A. (2016) 'Impact of engaging teaching model (ETM) on students' attendance', *Cogent Education*, 3, 1, pp.1-13.

Cameron, K. (2012) 'The capability approach: enabling musical learning', *British Journal of Music Education*, 29, 3, pp.281-292.

Camilleri-Cassar, F. (2017) 'About time: gender equality in Malta's working-time regime?', *Social Policy & Society*, 16, 4, pp.561-575.

Camilleri Grima, A. (2013) 'A select review of bilingualism in education in Malta', *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 16, 5, pp.553-569.

Camilleri, M. and De Giovanni, K. (2018) 'School as experienced by early school leavers', *Malta Review of Educational Research*, 12, 2, pp.238-258.

Cassidy, C. (2018) 'Wellbeing, being well or well becoming: who or what is it for and how might we get there?', in M. Thorburn, ed, *Wellbeing, Education and Contemporary Schooling*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp.13-26.

Cedefop (2017a) *Vocational Education and Training in Malta: Short Description*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Cedefop (2017b) *Cedefop European Public Opinion Survey on Vocational Education and Training*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Cerinsek, G., Hribar, T., Glodez, N. and Dolinsek, S. (2013) 'Which are my future career priorities and what influenced my choice of studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics? Some insights on educational choice - Case of Slovenia', *International Journal of Science Education*, 35, 17, pp.2999-3025.

Chang, H.J. (2011) *23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism*, London: Penguin.

Chertkovskaya, E., Watt, P., Tramer, S. and Spoelstra, S. (2013) 'Giving notice to employability', *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organisation*, 13, 4, pp.701-716.

Chircop, J. (2017) 'Shifting the colonial frontiers: the colonial state, elementary schooling and Maltese society', in R.G. Sultana, ed, *Yesterday's Schools: Readings in Maltese Education History*, 2 ed, Malta: Xirocco Publications, pp.147-160.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2011) *Research Methods in Education*, 7 ed, Abingdon: Routledge.

Colón-Rivera, R.J., Marshall, K., Soto-Santiago, F.J., Ortiz-Torres, D. and Flower, C.E. (2013) 'Moving forward: fostering the next generation of earth stewards in the STEM disciplines', *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, 11, 7, pp.383-391.

Cook-Sather, A. (2006) 'Sound, presence and power: "student voice" in educational research and reform', *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36, 4, pp.359-390.

Cort, P. (2010) 'Europeanisation and policy change in the Danish vocational education and training system', *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 5, 3, pp.331-343.

Cousin, G. (2009) *Researching Learning in Higher Education*, New York: Routledge.

Cummings, C., Laing, K., Law, J., McLaughlin, J., Papps, I., Todd, L. and Woolner, P. (2012) *Can changing aspirations and attitudes impact on educational attainment?*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Cunningham, P.M. (2004) 'Critical pedagogy and implications for human resource development', *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 6, 2, pp. 226-240.

Cutajar, M. (2007) 'Educational reform in the Maltese islands', *Journal of Maltese Education Research*, 5, 1, pp.3-21.

Dale, R. (2005) 'Globalisation, knowledge economy and comparative education', *Comparative Education*, 41, 2, pp.117-149.

Daniels, E. and Arapostathis, M. (2005) 'What do they really want? Student voices and motivation research', *Urban Education*, 40, 1, pp.34-59.

Deneulin, S. (2008) 'Beyond individual freedom and agency: structures of living together in the capability approach to development', in F. Comim, M. Qizilbash and S. Alkire, eds, *The Capability Approach: concepts, Measures and Applications*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.104-123.

Deprez, L.S. and Wood, D.R. (2013) 'Teaching for well-being: pedagogical strategies for meaning, value, relevance and justice', in A. Boni and M. Walker, eds, *Human Development and Capabilities: Re-imagining the University of the Twenty-first Century*, Oxford: Routledge, pp.145-161.

Dewey, J. (2008a) 'Democracy and Education', in J.A. Boydston, ed, *The Middle Works, 1899-1924 – John Dewey – Volume 9: 1916 – Democracy and Education*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, pp.1-356.

Dewey, J. (2008b) 'How we think: a restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process', in J.A. Boydston, ed, *The Later Works, 1925-1953 – John Dewey – Volume 8: 1933 – Essays and How We Think, Revised Edition,* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, pp.105-352.

Down, B., Smyth, J. and Robinson, J. (2019) 'Problematising vocational education and training in schools: using student narratives to interrupt neoliberal ideology', *Critical Studies in Education*, 60, 4, pp.443-461.

Drerup, J. (2015) 'Autonomy, perfectionism and the justification of education', *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 34, 1, pp.63-87.

Education Act (1988) *Chapter 327 of the Laws of Malta,* URL = http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8801 (accessed 18/07/2018).

EHEA (2015) *The Bologna Process Revisited: The Future of the European Higher Education Area*, EHEA Ministerial Conference, Yerevan, URL = http://bologna-yerevan2015.ehea.info/files/Bologna%20Process%20Revisited_Future%20of%20the%20EHEA%20Final.pdf (accessed 07/07/2018).

Emdin, C. (2010) *Urban Science Education for the Hip-Hop Generation*, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Erasmus+ (nd) 'Erasmus+ - Opportunities for individuals', URL = https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/opportunities/overview_en (accessed 07/08/2019).

European Commission (2002) *The Copenhagen Declaration - Declaration of the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training, and the European Commission*, 29-30 November, Copenhagen: European Commission.

European Commission (2009) *Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29 April*, Leuven: European Commission.

European Commission (2010a) *Europe 2020 - A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*, 3 April, Brussels: European Commission.

European Commission (2010b) *The Bruges Communiqué on Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training*, 7 December, Bruges: European Commission.

Fevre, R., Gareth, R. and Gorard, S. (1999) 'Some sociological alternatives to Human Capital Theory and their implications for research on post-compulsory education and training', *Journal of Education and Work*, 12, 2, pp.117-140.

Figueiredo de Barros, A. (2015) 'Crisis, what crisis? - The life goals of university-aged students during an ongoing economic and financial crisis', *Current Psychology*, 34, 2, pp.434-446.

Fisher, M. (2012) 'Chemistry and the challenge of sustainability', *Journal of Chemical Education*, 89, 2, pp.179-180.

Flew, T. (2014) 'Six theories of neoliberalism', *Thesis Eleven*, 122, 1, pp.49-71.

Flores-Crespo, P. (2007) 'Situating education in the human capabilities approach', in M. Walker, E. Unterhalter, eds, *Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Social Justice in Education*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 45-65.

Fredman, N. (2014) 'Understanding motivation for study: human capital or human capability?', *International Journal of Training Research*, 12, 2, pp. 93-105.

Freire, P. (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary Edition, New York: Continuum.

Freire, P. (2001) *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Freire, P. (2013) *Education for Critical Consciousness*, London: Bloomsbury.

Freire, P. (2014) *Pedagogy of Hope*, London: Bloomsbury.

Freire, P. (2016a) *Pedagogy of the Heart*, London: Bloomsbury.

Freire, P. (2016b) *Pedagogy in Process*, London, Bloomsbury.

Friedman, M. (2002) *Capitalism and Freedom*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Galea, L. (2003) 'MCAST: an investment in Malta's future', April 5, URL = https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20030405/opinion/mcast-an-investment-in-maltas-future.152858 (accessed 12/07/2018).

Gallacher, J. and Ingram, R. (2012) 'College-university links and impact on participation in Higher Education in Scotland', in J. Puukka, ed, *Post-Secondary and Vocational Education and Training: Pathways and Partnerships*, OECD Publishing, pp.95-108.

Garrod, N. (2009) 'England: merging to progress' in N. Garrod and B. Macfarlane, eds, *Challenging Boundaries: Managing the Integration of Post-Secondary Education*, New York: Routledge, pp.77-92.

Garrod, N. and Macfarlane, B. (2009) 'Further, Higher, better?' in N. Garrod and B. Macfarlane, eds, *Challenging Boundaries: Managing the Integration of Post-Secondary Education*, New York: Routledge, pp.3-12.

Gasper, D. and van Staveren, I. (2003) 'Development as freedom - and as what else?', *Feminist Economics*, 9, 2-3, pp.137-161.

Gesthuizen, M. and Verbakel, E. (2011) 'Job preferences in Europe', *European Societies*, 13, 5, pp.663-686.

Giddens, A. (1993) *New Rules of Sociological Method*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gini, A. (2001) *My Job, My Self - Work and the Creation of the Modern Individual*, New York: Routledge.

Giroux, H.A. (2015) *Education and the Crisis of Public Values*, 2 ed, New York: Peter Lang.

Giroux, H.A. (2016) *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life*, 2 ed, Oxford: Routledge.

Glassman, M. and Patton, R. (2014) 'Capability through participatory democracy: Sen, Freire, and Dewey', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 46, 12, pp.1353-1365.

Grix, J. (2002) 'Introducing students to the generic terminology of social research', *Politics*, 22, 3, pp.175-186.

Gross, M.J. and Manoharan, A. (2016) 'The balance of liberal and vocational values in hospitality higher education: voices of graduates', *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, 28, 1, pp.44-57.

Grubb, W.N. and Lazerson, M. (2007) *The Education Gospel: The Economic Power of Schooling*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Halbfas, B. (2017a) 'University of Coimbra: Supporting nascent entrepreneurs by extra-curricular activities', in C.K. Volkmann and D.B. Audretsch, eds, *Entrepreneurship Education at Universities: Learning from Twenty European Cases*, Switzerland: Springer, pp.289-325.

Halbfas, B. (2017b) 'Leuphana University of Lüneberg: Developing a comprehensive approach for diverse target groups', in C.K. Volkmann and D.B. Audretsch, eds, *Entrepreneurship Education at Universities: Learning from Twenty European Cases*, Switzerland: Springer, pp.571-621.

Halpern, D. (2005) *Social Capital*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hannon, C., Faas, D. and O'Sullivan, K. (2017) 'Widening the educational capabilities of socio-economically disadvantaged students through a model of social and cultural capital development', *British Educational Research Journal*, 43, 6, pp.1225-1245.

Harbour, C.P. (2015) *John Dewey and the Future of Community College Education*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Hargreaves, A. (2000) 'Four ages of professionalism and professional learning'. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 6, 2, pp.151-182.

Harreveld, R.E. (2008) 'Amartya Sen's capability approach and the brokering of learning provision for young adults', *Vocations and Learning*, 1, 3, pp.211-226.

Hart, C.S. (2009) 'Quo vadis? The capability space and new directions for the philosophy of educational research', *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 28, 3, pp.391-402.

Hart, C.S. (2013) *Aspirations, Education and Social Justice: Applying Sen and Bourdieu*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Hart, C.S. (2014) 'The capability approach and educational research' in C.S. Hart, M. Biggeri and B. Babic, eds, *Agency and Participation in Childhood and Youth - International Applications of the Capability Approach in Schools and Beyond*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp.17-43.

Hart, C.S. (2018) 'Education, capabilities and sustainable development' in F. Comim, S. Fennell and P.B. Anand, eds, *New Frontiers of the Capability Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.617-642.

Hart, C.S. and Brando, N. (2018) 'A capability approach to children's well-being, agency and participatory rights in education', *European Journal of Education*, 53, 3, pp.293-309.

Heil, S., Reisel, L. and Attewell, P. (2014) 'College selectivity and degree completion', *American Educational Research Journal*, 51, 5, pp.913-935.

Hippach-Schneider, U., Schneider, V., Ménard, B. and Tritscher-Archan, S. (2017) 'The underestimated relevance and value of vocational education in tertiary education - making the invisible visible', *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 69, 1, pp.28-46.

Hodge, S. (2016) 'Alienating curriculum work in Australian vocational education and training', *Critical Studies in Education*, 57, 2, pp.143-159.|

Hodson, D. (1998) *Teaching and Learning Science - Towards a Personalized Approach*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Hydén, L.C. and Bülow, P.H. (2003) 'Who's talking: drawing conclusions from focus groups - some methodological considerations', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 6, 4, pp.305-321.

IEP (nd) 'Sen's capability approach', *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, URL = http://www.iep.utm.edu/sen-cap (accessed: 05/08/2019).

James, A. (2019) 'Making a case for the playful university', in A. James and C. Nerantzi, eds, *The Power of Play in Higher Education - Creativity in Tertiary Learning*, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.1-19.

JC (nd) 'Entry Requirements', URL = https://www.jc.um.edu.mt/journey/admissionsadvice/joining (accessed 26/07/2019).

Jones, T. and Verghese, A, (2003) 'On becoming a humanities curriculum: the Center for Medical Humanities and Ethics at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio', *Academic Medicine*, 78, 10, pp.1010-1014.

Keep, E. (2012) 'Where next for vocational education?', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33, 2, pp.315-322.

Kiprianos, P. and Christodoulou, M. (2015) 'Ambivalent biographies in adolescence: What vocational students think and feel about their schooling', *SAGE Open*, October-December, pp.1-13.

Komulainen, K., Naskali, P., Korhonen, M. and Keskitalo-Foley, S. (2011) 'Internal entrepreneurship - a Trojan horse of the neoliberal governance of education? Finnish pre- and in-service teachers' implementation of and resistance towards entrepreneurship education', *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 9, 1, pp.341-374.

Kothmann, B. (2019) 'Exploration: play in engineering', in A. James and C. Nerantzi, eds, *The Power of Play in Higher Education - Creativity in Tertiary Learning*, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.131-140.

Lauri, M.A., Cordina, M., Lauri, J. and Mifsud, D. (2011) 'Choosing the Pharmacy course: the need for guidance and counseling in preparation for higher education', *Pharmacy Education*, 11, 1, pp.85-90.

Lehmann, W. (2009) 'University as Vocational Education: Working-Class Students' Expectations for University', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30, 2, pp.137-149.

Leney, T. and Green, A. (2005) 'Achieving the Lisbon goal: the contribution of vocational education and training', *European Journal of Education*, 40, 3, pp.261-278.

Leßmann, O. and Bonvin, J.M. (2011) 'Job-satisfaction in the broader framework of the capability approach', *Management Revue*, 22, 1, pp.84-99.

Lilischkis, S. (2017) 'University of Huddersfield: Entrepreneurship education across all schools and how to teach the teachers', in C.K. Volkmann and D.B. Audretsch, eds, *Entrepreneurship Education at Universities: Learning from Twenty European Cases*, Switzerland: Springer, pp.480-512.

Lonzano, J.F., Boni, A., Peris, J. and Hueso, A. (2012) 'Competencies in higher education: a critical analysis from the capabilities approach', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 46, 1, pp.132-147.

López-Fogués, A. (2012) 'The discourses of vocational education and training: a developmental response from a European perspective', *European Educational Research Journal*, 11, 4, pp.558-569.

Lorenz, C.F.G. (2006) 'Will universities survive the European integration. Higher Education policies in the EU and in the Netherlands before and after the Bologna Declaration', *Sociologia Internationalis*, 44, 4, pp.123-151.

Lum, G. (2009) *Vocational and Professional Capability*, London: Continuum.

Martins, N. (2011) 'Sustainability economics, ontology and the capability approach', *Ecological Economics*, 72, 15 December, pp.1-4.

MATSEC (2016) *MATSEC Examinations Board SEC Examinations 2016: Statistical Report*, Malta: Università ta' Malta.

MATSEC (2018) *Matriculation Certificate Examinations 2018: Statistical Report*, Malta: Università ta' Malta.

Mayo, P. (2009) 'The 'competence' discourse in education and the struggle for social agency and critical citizenship', *International Journal of Educational Policies*, 3, 2, pp.5-16.

Mayo, P. (2014) 'Gramsci and the politics of education', *Capital & Class*, 38, 2, pp.385-398.

Mayo, P. (2017) 'Higher education, socialism and industrial development: Dom Mintoff and the 'worker-student' scheme', in R.G. Sultana, ed, *Yesterday's Schools: Readings in Maltese Education History*, 2 ed, Malta: Xirocco Publications, pp.301-313.

MCAST (nd) 'About Us', URL = https://www.mcast.edu.mt/about-mcast (accessed 26/07/2019).

MCAST (2015), *National Vocational Education and Training Policy*, Malta: Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology/Ministry for Education and Employment.

McDonald, P., Pini, B., Bailey, J. and Price, R. (2011) 'Young people's aspirations for education, work, family and leisure', *Work, Employment and Society*, 25, 1, pp.68-84.

McMahon, S., Harwood, V. and Hickey-Moody, A. (2016) ''Students that just hate school wouldn't go': educationally disengaged and disadvantaged young people's talk about university', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 37, 8, pp.1109-1128.

Meerabeau, E., Sooboodoo, E., d'Avray, L. (2008) 'Interprofessional attitudes amongst undergraduate students in the health professions: a longitudinal questionnaire survey', *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 45, 11, pp.1667-1681.

MfEE (2017) *The Working Group on the Future of Post-Secondary Education*, January, Malta: Ministry for Education and Employment.

Michel-Schertges, D. (2015) 'Free choice of education? Capabilities, possibility spaces, and incapacitations of education, labor, and the way of living one values', in H.U. Otto, ed, *Facing Trajectories from School to Work: Towards a Capability-Friendly Youth Policy in Europe*, Switzerland: Springer, pp.73-86.

Moodie, G.F. (2008) *From Vocational to Higher Education - An International Perspective*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Morehouse, R.E. (2012) *Beginning Interpretative Inquiry: A Step-by-step Approach to Research and Evaluation*, Oxford: Routledge.

Morrison, A. (2008) ''I can't do anymore education': class, individualisation and educational decision-making', *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 60, 4, pp.349-362.

Munn, P. and Drever, E. (2004) *Using Questionnaires in Small-scale Research: A Beginner's Guide*, Revised Edition, Glasgow: University of Glasgow/The Scottish Council for Research in Education.

Murry, R., McKay, E., Thompson, S. and Donald, M. (2000) 'Practising reflection: a medical humanities approach to occupational therapist education', *Medical Teacher*, 22, 3, pp.276-281.

NCFHE (nd) 'Malta Qualifications Framework', URL = https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/Pages/MQF.aspx (accessed 26/07/2019).

NCFHE (2014) *The Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life: National Data for Malta*, December, Malta: National Commission for Further and Higher Education.

NCFHE (2015) *Higher Education Strategy for Malta*, Malta: National Commission for Further and Higher Education/Ministry for Education and Employment.

NCFHE (2016) *Graduate Tracer Study - Final Report*, Malta: National Commission for Further and Higher Education/Ministry for Education and Employment.

NCFHE (2018) *Further and Higher Education Statistics 2015-2016*, May, Malta: National Commission for Further and Higher Education.

NSO (2019a) *Regional Statistics - Malta - 2019 Edition*, Malta: National Statistics Office.

NSO (2019b) *News Release - Graduate Students: 2016/2017*, July 31, 123/2019, Malta: National Statistics Office.

Nussbaum, M.C. (1997) *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Nussbaum, M.C. (2000) *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Nussbaum, M.C. (2003) 'Capabilities as fundamental entitlements: Sen and social justice', *Feminist Economics*, 9, 2-3, pp.33-59.

Nussbaum, M.C. (2006) ‘Education and democratic citizenship: capabilities and quality education’, *Journal of Human Development*, 7, 3, pp.385-398.

Nussbaum, M.C. (2010) *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Nussbaum, M.C. (2011) *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Harvard.

Nylund, M., Rosvall, P.Å. and Ledman, K. (2017) ‘The vocational-academic divide in neoliberal upper secondary curricula: the Swedish case’, *Journal of Education Policy*, 32, 6, pp.788-808.

Olssen, M., Codd, J. and O'Neill, A. (2004) *Education Policy: Globalization, Citizenship and Democracy*, London: Sage.

Oosterlaken, I. (2011) ‘Inserting technology in the relational ontology of Sen’s capability approach’, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 12, 3, pp.425-432.

Ormston, R., Spencer, L., Barnard, M. and Snape, D. (2014) ‘The foundations of qualitative research’, in J. Ritchie, J. Lewis, C. McNaughton Nicholls and R. Ormston, eds, *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, 2 ed, London: Sage, pp.1-25.

Patnaik, P. (2013) ‘On the political economy of educational ‘reforms’’, *Social Scientist*, 41, 7/8, pp.93-100.

Payne, J. (2003) *Choice at the End of Compulsory Schooling: A Research Review*, Nottingham: DfES Publications.

Peppin Vaughan, R. and Walker, M. (2012) ‘Capabilities, values and education policy’, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 13, 3, pp.495-512.

Pinheiro, R. and Kyvik, S. (2009) ‘Norway: Separate but connected’, in N. Garrod, B. Macfarlane, eds, *Challenging Boundaries: Managing the Integration of Post-Secondary Education*, New York: Routledge, pp.47-58.

Pinxten, M., De Fraine, B., Van Den Noortgate, W., Van Damme, J. and Anumendem, D. (2012) ‘Educational choice in secondary school in Flanders: the relative impact of occupational interests on option choice’, *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 18, 6, pp.541-569.

Potsi, A. (2018) ‘Early childhood educational curricula: implications of the capability approach’, in H.U. Otto, M. Walker and H. Ziegler, eds, *Capability-Promoting Policies: Enhancing Individual and Social Development*, Bristol: Policy Press, pp.237-258.

Powell, J.J.W., Bernhard, N. and Graf, L. (2012) ‘The emergent European model in skill formation: comparing higher education and vocational training in the Bologna and Copenhagen processes’, *Sociology of Education*, 85, 3, pp. 240-258.

Pratt, J. (1997) *The Polytechnic Experiment 1965-1992*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Pusca, D. and Northwood, D.O. (2015) 'How to engage students in the context of outcome-based teaching and learning', *World Transactions on Engineering and Technology Education,* 13, 3, pp.268-273.

Pym, J. (2017) 'Voice, identity, and belonging: making a difference' in M. Walker and M. Wilson-Strydom, eds, *Socially Just Pedagogies, Capabilities and Quality in Higher Education*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.177-199.

Qizilbash, M. (2014) 'Are modern philosophical accounts of well-being excessively 'individualistic'?', *International Review of Economics*, 61, 2, pp.173-189.

Quinn, J. (2003) *Powerful Subjects: Are Women Really Taking Over the University?*, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

Rapley, E. (2014) 'Horses for courses, or a grumble in the jungle? HE in FE student perceptions of the HE experience in a land-based college', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education,* 19, 2, pp.194-211.

Ravinet, P. (2008) 'From Voluntary Participation to Monitored Coordination: why European countries feel increasingly bound by their commitment to the Bologna Process', *European Journal of Education,* 43, 3, pp.353-367.

RCCP (nd) 'What is a clinical physiologist?', URL = https://www.rccp.co.uk/articles/113/What-is-a-clinical-physiologist (accessed on 27/07/2019).

Regmi, K. D. (2015) 'Lifelong learning: foundational models, underlying assumptions and critiques', *International Review of Education – Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 61, 2, pp.133-151.

Robertson, P.J. (2015) 'Towards a capability approach to careers: applying Amartya Sen's thinking to career guidance and development', *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance,* 15, 1, pp.75-88.

Robertson, P.J. and Egdell, V. (2018) 'A capability approach to career development: an introduction and implications for practice', *Australian Journal of Career Development,* 27, 3, pp.119-126.

Robeyns, I. (2005) 'The capability approach: a theoretical survey', *Journal of Human Development*, 6, 1, pp.93-114.

Robeyns, I. (2006) 'Three models of education: rights, capabilities and human capital', *Theory and Research in Education,* 4, 1, pp.69-84.

Robeyns, I. (2017) *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined*, Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

Sahlberg, P. (2007) 'Education policies for raising student learning: the Finnish approach', *Journal of Education Policy*, pp.147-171.

Saito, M. (2003) ‘Amartya Sen's capability approach to education: a critical exploration’. *Journal of Philosophy of Education,* 37, 1, pp.17-33.

Sandars, J. and Hart, C.S. (2015) ‘The capability approach for medical education: AMEE guide no. 97’, *Medical Teacher,* 37, 6, pp.510-520.

Sen, A. (1984) ‘The living standard’, *Oxford Economic Papers, Supplement: Economic Theory and Hicksian Themes,* 36, November, pp.74-90.

Sen, A. (1992) *Inequality Reexamined,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sen, A. (2001) *Development as Freedom,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sen, A. (2004) ‘Capabilities, lists and public reason: continuing the conversation’, *Feminist Economics,* 10, 3, pp.77-80.

Sen, A. (2010) *The Idea of Justice,* London: Penguin.

Şerban-Oprescu, G. (2011) ‘An epistemological perspective on the quality of life concept’, *Theoretical and Applied Economics,* 18, 2, pp.171-180.

Shäfer, S. and Otto, H.U. (2014) ‘Introduction: A social sciences perspective on the Capability Approach’, in H.U. Otto and S. Shäfer, eds, *New Approaches Towards the ‘Good Life’: Applications and Transformations of the Capability Approach,* Oplanden: Barbara Budrich Publishers, pp.7-13.

Shallcross, D. and Harrison, T. (2019) ‘Exploration: public engagement activities for chemistry students’, in A. James and C. Nerantzi, eds, *The Power of Play in Higher Education - Creativity in Tertiary Learning*, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.145-158.

Shaull, R. (2000) ‘Foreword’, in P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary Edition, New York: Continuum, pp.29-34.

Shulman, W.M. and Fenstermacher, G.D. (2008) ‘Forward’, in W.M. Sullivan and M.S. Rosin, *A New Agenda for Higher Education: Shaping a Life of the Mind for Practice,* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp.vii-xiii.

Siisiäinen, M. (2000) ‘Two concepts of social capital: Bourdieu vs. Putnam’, *ISTR Fourth International Conference - The Third Sector: For What and For Whom?,* Trinity College Dublin, 5-8 July, Ireland: ISTR.

Smyth, J. (2012) ‘Doing research on student voice in Australia’, *Management in Education,* 26, 3, pp.153-154.

Soden, R. and Pithers, R. (2001) ‘Teaching vocational undergraduates in a Further Education college: A case study of practice’, *New Zealand Journal of Vocational Education Research,* 9, 1, pp.85-106.

Sow Paino, J. (2013) ‘Social engagement and universities: a case study from Mexico’, in A. Boni and M. Walker, eds, *Human Development and Capabilities: Re-imagining the University of the Twenty-first Century,* Oxford: Routledge, pp.216-229.

Spiteri, A. (2016) 'Developing a national quality culture for further and higher education in a micro-state: the case of Malta', *Malta Review of Educational Research*, 10, 2, pp.297-315.

Stewart, F. (2005) 'Groups and capabilities', *Journal of Human Development*, 6, 2, pp.185-204.

Stoten, D. (2018) 'Employability: a contested concept in Higher Education', *Journal of Pedagogic Development*, 7, 1, pp.9-17.

Strathdee, R. (2003) 'Vocational education and training and social capital in New Zealand', *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 55, 1, pp.65-84.

Stephens, C., Breheny, M., and Mansvelt, J. (2015) 'Healthy ageing from the perspective of older people: A capability approach to resilience', *Psychology and Health*, 30, 6, pp.715-731.

Sugiono, S., Skourdoumbis, A. and Gale, T. (2018) 'Bridging homes and classrooms: advancing students' capabilities', *Teaching Education*, 29, 1, pp.17-32.

Sullivan, W.M and Rosin, M.S. (2008) *A New Agenda for Higher Education: Shaping a Life of the Mind for Practice*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sultana, R.G. (1992) *Education and National Development: Historical and Critical Perspectives on Vocational Schooling in Malta*, Malta: Mireva Publications.

Sultana, R.G. (1995) 'Education and social transition: vocationalism, ideology and the problems of development', *International Review of Education*, 41, 3-4, pp.199-221.

Sultana, R.G. (2017) 'Malta's educational history: past, present - what future?', in R.G. Sultana, ed, *Yesterday's Schools: Readings in Maltese Education History*, 2 ed, Malta: Xirocco Publications, pp.xv-xxv.

Tan, E. (2014) 'Human Capital Theory: a holistic criticism', *Review of Educational Research*, 84, 3, pp.411-445.

Tanweer, A. (2017) 'Capital or people - what is the true purpose of education?', *On the Horizon*, 25, 1, pp.4-6.

Taylor, A. (2016) *Vocational Education in Canada*, Ontario: Oxford University Press.

Terzi, L. (2007) 'The capability to be educated', in M. Walker, E. Unterhalter, eds, *Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Social Justice in Education*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.25-43.

Thake, A.M. (2018) *Graduate Employability Skills in Malta*, Malta: Kite.

THE (2010) 'Thames Valley University's name change approved by privy council', August 3, URL = https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/thames-valley-universitys-name-change-approved-by-privy-council/412877.article (accessed 16/07/2018).

Tholen, G. (2017) *Graduate Work: Skills, Credentials, careers, and Labour Markets*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Timesofmalta.com (2010) 'Last Junior Lyceum exam held', May 6, URL = https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20100506/local/last-junior-lyceum-exam-held.306138 (accessed 18/07/2018).

Timesofmalta.com (2015) 'MCAST to offer Masters degrees', June 15, URL = https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20150615/local/mcast-to-offer-masters-degrees.572585 (accessed 15/01/2018).

Timesofmalta.com (2019) 'First Mcast research symposium', July 7, URL = https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/first-mcast-research-symposium.719782 (accessed 07/08/2019).

Tinwell, A. (2013) 'Game over? Assisting transition from FE to HE level studies for Games Art students', *Arts, Design and Communication in Higher Education*, 12, 1, pp.123-135.

Tiwari, M. (2018) 'Capability of capabilities and aspirations of the middle classes in India' in F. Comim, S. Fennell, P.B. Anand, eds, *New Frontiers of the Capability Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.411-435.

Topper, A.M. (2019) 'More than a number: a capabilities framework for conceptualizing community college success', *Teachers College Record*, 121, 2, pp.1-52.

UNDP (nd) 'Human Development Index (HDI)', URL = http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi (accessed 26/07/2019).

UNDP (2015) *Human Development Report 2015: Work for Human Development*, New York: United Nations Development Programme.

UNESCO (1969) *Malta Polytechnic Institute (now the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology), Report on Project Results, Conclusions and Recommendations*, July, Paris: UNESCO.

Unterhalter, E. (2009) 'Education', in S. Deneulin and L. Shahani, eds, *An Introduction to the Human Development and Capability Approach*, London: Earthscan, pp.207-227.

UoM (2017) 'Matriculation Examination Regulations', October 2017, URL = https://www.um.edu.mt/matsec/regulations/mc_regulations (accessed 12/02/2018).

Vallejo, C. and Dooly, M. (2008) *Educational Policies that Address Social Inequality, Country Report: Malta*, Barcelona: EPASI/Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona.

Vandekinderen, C., Roets, G., Van Keer, H. and Roose, R. (2018) 'Tackling social inequality and exclusion in education: from human capital to capabilities', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22, 1, pp.1-20.

van Rooij, E.C.M., Jansen, E.P.W.A. and van de Grift, W.J.C.M. (2017) 'Secondary school students' engagement profiles and their relationship with academic adjustment and achievement in university', *Learning and Individual Differences*, 54, pp.9-19.

Ventura, F. (2015) *MATSEC reforms: What's in the pipeline?* [PowerPoint presentation], Malta Union of Teachers Conference, 21 November, Malta, URL = http://mut.org.mt/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/MUT-2015-VET-MATSEC-Conference-05-Frank-Ventura.pdf (accessed 01/07/2019).

Vieno, A., Santinello, M., Pastore, M. and Perkins, D.D. (2007) 'Social support, sense of community in school, and self-efficacy as resources during early adolescence: an integrative model', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 39, 1-2, pp.177-190.

Visanich, V. (2017) 'Youth in the age of anxiety: the case of a southern European location', *Contemporary Social Science*, 12, 3-4, pp.333-346.

Volkmann, C.K. and Audretsch, D.B. (2017) 'Introduction: The mandate for entrepreneurship education', in C.K. Volkmann and D.B. Audretsch, eds, *Entrepreneurship Education at Universities: Learning from Twenty European Cases*, Switzerland: Springer, pp.1-10.

Vos, R. and Ballet, J. (2018) 'Formal education, well-being and aspirations: a capability-based analysis on high school pupils from France' in F. Comim, S. Fennell and P.B. Anand, eds, *New Frontiers of the Capability Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.549-570.

Walker, M. (2005) 'Amartya Sen's capability approach and education', *Educational Action Research*, 13, 1, pp.103-110.

Walker, M. (2006) *Higher Education Pedagogies - A Capabilities Approach*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Walker, M. (2007) 'Selecting capabilities for gender equality in education', in M. Walker and E. Unterhalter, eds, *Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Social Justice in Education*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.177-195.

Walker, M. (2008) 'A human capabilities framework for evaluating student learning', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13, 4, pp.477-487.

Walker, M. (2010) 'Critical capability pedagogies and university education', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 42, 8, pp.898-917.

Walker, M. (2012a) 'A capital or capabilities education narrative in a world of staggering inequalities?', *International Journal of Educational Development*, 32, 3, pp.384-393.

Walker, M. (2012b) 'Universities and a Human Development ethics: A capabilities approach to curriculum', *European Journal of Education*, 47, 3, pp.448-461.

Walker, M. (2015) 'Imagining STEM higher education futures: advancing human well-being', *Higher Education*, 70, 3, pp.417-425.

Walker, M. (2019) 'The achievement of university access: conversion factors, capabilities and choices', *Social Inclusion*, 7, 1, pp.52-60.

Walker, M. and Fongwa, S. (2017) *Universities, Employability and Human Development*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Walther, A., Warth, A., Ule, M. and du Bois-Reymond, M. (2015) ' 'Me, my education and I': constellations of decision-making in young people's educational trajectories', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 28, 3, pp.349-371.

Weier, M. and Lee, C. (2016) 'Stagnant or successful, carefree or anxious? Australian university students' goals and beliefs about adulthood and their current well-being', *Australian Psychologist*, 51, 6, pp.422-430.

Wheelahan, L. (2009) 'Post-secondary education and social justice' in N. Garrod, B. Macfarlane, eds, *Challenging Boundaries: Managing the Integration of Post-Secondary Education*, New York: Routledge, pp.29-44.

Williams, B., Brown, T., McKenna, L., Palermo, C., Morgan, P. and Brightwell, R. (2015) 'Students' attitudes toward interprofessional learning: a comparison between two universities', *Journal of Allied Health*, 44, 4, pp.201-207.

Wilson-Strydom, M. (2011) 'University access for social justice: a capabilities perspective', *South African Journal of Education*, 31, 3, pp.407-418.

Wilson-Strydom, M. (2016) 'A capabilities list for equitable transitions to university: a top-down and bottom-up approach', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 17, 2, pp.145-160.

Wilson-Strydom, M. (2017) 'Pedagogic rights for transformative student learning: what do lecturers say and do?' in M. Walker and M. Wilson-Strydom, eds, *Socially Just Pedagogies, Capabilities and Quality in Higher Education*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.69-88.

Wilson-Strydom, M. and Walker, M. (2015) 'A capabilities-friendly conceptualisation of flourishing in and through education', *Journal of Moral Education*, 44, 3, pp.310-324.

Wilson-Strydom, M. and Walker, M. (2017) 'Human development as an expansive perspective on socially just pedagogies and quality' in M. Walker and M. Wilson-Strydom, eds, *Socially Just Pedagogies, Capabilities and Quality in Higher Education*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.223-243.

Wood, D. and Deprez, L.S. (2012) 'Teaching for human well-being: curricular implications for the capability approach', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 13, 3, pp.471-493.

Young, I.M. (2011) *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Zammit Marmara, D. (2017) 'The ideological struggle over comprehensive education in Malta', in R.G. Sultana, ed, *Yesterday's Schools: Readings in Maltese Education History*, 2 ed, Malta: Xirocco Publications, pp.273-300.

Zepke, N. and Leach, L. (2010) 'Improving student engagement: ten proposals for action', *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 11, 3, pp.167-177.

APPENDIX I – Participant information sheet

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

Prepared for the 'good life'? Higher Education 'Applied Sciences' students in a vocational college.

Researcher: Ralph Cassar, EdD Candidate, University of Glasgow. (ralph.cassar@mcast.edu.mt / 99894962)

Supervisor: Dr Muir Houston, School of Education, University of Glasgow. (muir.houston@glasgow.ac.uk)

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

The study

The purpose of the study is to learn about what degree students following a Bachelor of Science in Chemical Technology, Health Science and Environmental Engineering at the Institute of Applied Sciences of the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) want to do after they leave college, if they think college is preparing them for them to succeed in life, what they think of their educational and work experience, what will help them succeed and what they think constrains them, the reason for choosing their programme of studies and what in their opinion is 'a good life'.

The researcher will use the data for a doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Glasgow as part of the Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme, and possibly for conference papers, and publication in books and academic papers.

Participation is voluntary. Participation will entail a 1 hour interview or a 2 hour focus group with other students on MCAST Institute of Applied Sciences premises in Paola, Malta with the researcher. The interview or focus group discussion will be audio recorded. You may be contacted for clarifications after the interview or focus group. If you are interested in participating in this research study fill in the form attached, indicating whether you want to participate in the focus group discussion or be interviewed individually by the researcher.

Participant's personal details will be kept confidential by allocating pseudonyms on transcription of the interview or focus group discussion.

You have the right to withdraw from the research at any point. Your non-participation in or withdrawal from the research will not impact in any way any marks or grades.

Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it possible, unless during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm. In that case I might have to inform relevant agencies of this.

Data will be stored securely by the researcher. Recordings will be transcribed by the researcher. The audio recordings will be destroyed on completion of the project.

This project has been considered and approved by the University of Glasgow, College of Social Sciences, College Research Ethics Committee.

For further information or to pursue any complaint in relation to this study contact: College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, email: socsci-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk

Participant Information Sheet

Prepared for the 'good life'? Higher Education 'Applied Sciences' students in a vocational college.

Researcher: Ralph Cassar, EdD Candidate, University of Glasgow. (ralph.cassar@mcast.edu.mt / 99894962)

Supervisor: Dr Muir Houston, School of Education, University of Glasgow. (muir.houston@glasgow.ac.uk)

RETURN TO INSTITUTE SECRETARY IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING

Name and Surname:	
Email:	
Course:	
Year 1, 2 or 3:	
I want to participate in:	**[ ] FOCUS GROUP [ ] INTERVIEW**

APPENDIX II - Interview and focus group scheme

ENGLISH (INGLIŻ)	**MALTI (MALTESE)**
Prior educational experience. Where did you go to primary and secondary school? Where you happy at school? Which subjects did you like? Did you have a favourite teacher? Tell me about your experience in secondary school.	Fejn kont tmur skola? Primarja? Sekondarja? Qabel dħalt l-MCAST? Kif tħoss li mort l-iskola? Kont kuntent? X'kien jogħġbok? Idejqek? Suġġetti favoriti? Kellek għalliema favoriti? X'kienet l-esperjenza tiegħek l-iskola sekondarja?
What did you do after finishing secondary school? Why did you make that choice? What made you decide to continue studying? Friends? Family?	X'għamilt wara s-sekondarja? Għaliex? Għaliex komplejt tistudja? Min ħajjrek? Ġenituri? Sħabek?
Why did you choose to continue studying at MCAST?	Għaliex għażilt l-MCAST? Kif wasalt li tagħżel l-MCAST?
Choice of degree area. Why did you choose chemical technology/health sciences/environmental engineering? If you had to make subject choices again what would you choose?	Liema degree qed tistudja? Għaliex għażilt din id-*degree*? X'laqtek? Kieku kellek tagħżel mill-ġdid kont tagħżel xi ħaġa oħra?
What do you want to do in life? Is there something you want to do or achieve? Knowledge – are you 'getting' the knowledge you think is important for you to reach your goals?	Xi trid tagħmel f'ħajtek? Hekk, hemm xi ħaġa li tgħid 'irrid nagħmel hekk', 'jekk jirnexxieli nagħmel it-tali ħaġa nkun kuntent(a)? Tħoss li qed titgħallem affarijiet li se jkunu utli għalik 'il quddiem u biex tasal fejn trid f'ħajtek?
What other interests do students have and may want to develop further? Are there subjects or things that you did not learn at MCAST which interest you?	Hemm xi affarijiet u interessi oħra li għandek? Affarijiet li forsi ma' titgħallimhomx l-MCAST, jew affarijiet li mhux akkademiċi/tal-iskola li jinteressawk u li tħobb tagħmel jew li kieku tixtieq tagħmel?
Aspirations and achievements and how they think their education helps or hinders them achieving the 'good life'. Does your course at MCAST help you reach your goals? What helps you or hinders you? What would you like to do in the future? What would you like to be in the future?	Tħoss li s'issa qiegħed tirnexxi f'dak li tixtieq? L-aspirazzjonijiet tiegħek? Taħseb li l-kors l-MCAST qed jgħinek tilħaq il-miri tiegħek? Kif qed jgħinek? Kif qed ifixklek? X'inhuma l-affarijiet li jagħmlulek kuraġġ? L-affarijiet li jistgħu jaqtgħulek qalbek? X'tixtieq li tagħmel fil-futur? X'tixtieq li tkun/li ssir fil-futur?
Students' conception of the 'good life'. What does 'having a good life' mean to you?	X'tifhem b'ħajja tajba – li jkollok ħajja tajba? 'Jien kelli/għandi ħajja tajba u sodisfaċenti' jekk...?
After completing your degree where do you see yourself?	Wara li tispiċċa mill-MCAST, fejn tara lilek innifsek?
Your experience at MCAST – what do you like, what would you change? Anything that helps or hinders learning? Anything that could be done to help your learning, by teachers, MCAST or by yourself? Do you feel MCAST has changed the way you see things?	L-esperjenza tiegħek l-MCAST – x'jogħġbok? Xi tbiddel? Fil-kors? Fil-kontenut tal-kors? X'iżżid? Xi tnaqqas? Affarijiet oħra? Il-mod kif isir it-tagħlim. X'jgħinek jew itellfek milli titgħallem? X'jista' jsir aħjar, minnek, mill-MCAST jew mill-għalliema? Tħoss li nbdilt, kif tħares lejn il-ħajja?
What does education prepare you for? What should it prepare you for? Why study?	L-edukazzjoni – x'ittik? Għaliex tagħżel li tistudja? Għal xiex tippreparak? Għal xiex għandha tippreparak?
Work experience – Do you work? What is your experience during placements or apprenticeship? What did you learn at work?	Nitkellmu dwar l-esperjenza tiegħek fuq ix-xogħol. Qatt ħdimt s'issa? Jew forsi taħdem bħalissa? L-esperjenzi tiegħek fuq apprentistat jew placement? X'itik ix-xogħol?

APPENDIX III – Consent forms for interviews and focus groups

College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

University of Glasgow
College of Social Sciences

Consent Form (Interview)

Title of Project: Prepared for the 'good life'? Higher Education 'Applied Sciences' students in a vocational college.

Name of Researcher: Ralph Cassar.

Name of Supervisor: Dr Muir Houston.

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I consent / do not consent (delete as applicable) to interviews being audio-recorded.

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.

I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my grades arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

- All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- The material will be destroyed once the project is complete.
- The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.
- I understand that other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant …… Signature ……..

Date ……

Name of Researcher RALPH CASSAR Signature ……..

Date ……

University of Glasgow
College of Social Sciences

Consent Form (Focus Group)

Title of Project: Prepared for the 'good life'? Higher Education 'Applied Sciences' students in a vocational college.

Name of Researcher: Ralph Cassar.

Name of Supervisor: Dr Muir Houston.

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I consent / do not consent (delete as applicable) to interviews being audio-recorded.

I understand that contributions to the focus group discussion have to be respectful of others and that everything said within the focus group should be considered as confidential and should not be repeated outside of the group.

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.

I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my grades arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

- All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- The material will be destroyed once the project is complete.
- The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.
- I understand that other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form

I agree to take part in this research study ☐

I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant …… Signature ……

Date ……

Name of Researcher RALPH CASSAR Signature ……

Date ……