Chapter 1: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Maltese Society

Internationalisation of Maltese Society and Education

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Abstract

Malta has witnessed a stark increase in immigration in recent years. The European Commission's Country Report for Malta 2019 (European Commission 2019) suggests that labour and skills shortages may be a pull factor for international labour to Malta. However, push and pull factors for migration have become more complex in the 20th century, including aspects such as safety from wars, and political or economic crises (Arar et al. 2019, 2020a, 2020b; IOM 2020). Moreover, the profile of migrants has changed from targeted recruitment of guest workers in the post-war period to substantial diversity of countries of origin, languages, religions or migration channels (Massey 1990; Vertovec 2007, 2018). This diversification can also be witnessed in Maltese society and education and is posing challenges for schools to provide inclusive education suited to the learning needs of a diversifying student population (Bezzina and Vassallo 2019). However, while some qualitative research, through isolated snapshots of the numbers of international students in compulsory education, exists, detailed data and analysis of its development over time are lacking.

This research, therefore, investigates data collected in recent years in Maltese society and within compulsory education. By studying the change in figures of international residents and students in compulsory education (public, church and private schools), the article provides evidence of the rate at which diversification has been witnessed. It focuses upon diversification by sector and evaluates geographical differences witnessed within this diversification. Moreover, it investigates differences in the profile of international students enrolled in different educational institutions to demonstrate the extent to which 'super-diversity' is encountered within Maltese schools.

Keywords:

immigration, internationalisation, migrants, Malta, education, perception, policy response

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Introduction

Recent decades have seen an increase in international migration in terms of scale, in the diversification of countries of origin that migrants hail from, as well as the countries of destination. An increase has also been noted in the differentiation of migration channels and resulting migration status and entitlements, changes in age and gender profile of migrants, their spatial distribution, labour market access and experiences and responses from the receiving countries' population and public service providers (Vertovec 2007, 2018; Arar et al. 2020a; IOM 2020). These various variables are not new. However, Vertovec (2007) argues that their interplay and scale have changed substantially from previous periods of international migration to warrant more differentiated analysis, terminology and policy responses that go beyond the focus of migrants' country of origin. This is all the more true in view of challenges to the concept of multiculturalism in response to radicalization and the threat of terrorism in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Vertovec 2007; IOM 2020). Moreover, push and pull factors for migration have become more complex in the 21st century, including also aspects such as safety from wars, and political, economic (Arar et al. 2019, 2020a, 2020b; IOM 2020) and environmental crises (Adamo and Izazola 2010; Arar et al. 2020b; IOM 2020). With immigration increasing and diversifying globally (Massey 1990; Vertovec 2007; Arar et al. 2020a, 2020b; IOM 2020), it has also increased in countries that formerly witnessed limited inflows of migrants or were actually countries from which individuals emigrated. Malta is such a case in point with recent substantial increases in immigration (NSO 2014; Bezzina and Vassallo 2019; and see Figure 1). Such increases affect public perception and public service provision, particularly transport, healthcare and education (Vertovec 2007; Arar et al. 2020a, 2020b; IOM 2020; Bezzina and Vassallo 2019). Indeed, in a qualitative research Bezzina and Vassallo (2019) analysed its impact on school leadership in secondary schools in Malta. However, they stressed the need for quantitative analysis on the changing demographic of compulsory school students in Malta (Bezzina and Vassallo 2019). It is for this reason that this article looks more closely at the recent immigration patterns in society and education in Malta in the context of overall

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changes in global migration patterns. It seeks to address the research questions which investigate how Maltese society and education have been transformed by immigration. More specifically, the article will analyse the magnitude and speed of the increase in migrant residents and school students; whether there are particular patterns to be observed in enrolments of international students in public, church and private schools; and whether particular patterns can be observed in the spatial distribution of international students in Malta. The second research question will explore the public perception of this transformation. The article, therefore, provides an overview of data evidencing these recent migration flows within the education sphere as one of the public services affected by it, and discusses their impact, public perception and possible policy solutions. In this way the paper contributes to providing an overview and analysis of existing data and trends of increases in international students in compulsory education in Malta, since to date such a comprehensive overview is lacking.

Changes in Global Migration Patterns

International migration has been witnessed throughout history with European colonisation between 1500 and 1800; migration from Europe in the early 19th century due to industrialization; and refugees from Europe between World War I and World War II (Massey 1990). Thus, it stemmed largely from Europe towards a restricted number of countries. This changed, however, after World War II with a more targeted recruitment of guest workers from countries with either geographical, cultural or historical links and proximity (Massey 1990; Vertovec 2007). The intended temporary migration transformed progressively into permanent residence (Massey 1990; Vertovec 2007) and actually encouraged increased migration (Massey 1990). Besides immigration regulations in terms of family reunion, interpersonal links of migrants with their home and host country decreased the cost of migration in terms of information on the host country, its labour market, housing or services (Massey 1990). Thus, once a critical mass is reached, immigration tends to further increase irrespective of changes in wages, job opportunities or policies in host countries (Massey 1990).

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Indeed, since 1990 immigration has increased in numbers of migrants, countries of origin and destination, migration channels and migrants' legal statuses due to various conflicts around the world (Vertovec 2007; IOM 2020). The IOM's World Migration Report 2020 indicates that the share of migrants among the total world population was around 2.3% in the 1970s and 1980s, rose to about 2.9% in the 1990s and first decade of the new millennium and increased over 3.0% since 2010 to reach 3.5% in 2019 (IOM 2020: 21). Although these figures show that migrants remain a relatively small share of the total world population, it is evident that figures have increased in absolute and relative terms. Indeed, between 2000 and 2019 Europe witnessed the second largest growth in migrants (25 million migrants) after Asia (34 million migrants) and now has the third highest share of migrants among the population (11%) after Oceania (21%) and North America (16%) (IOM 2020: 24). This has been further supported by cheaper transportation, communication and technology as evidenced by increased remittances, phone calls, marriages and diaspora engagement impacting on social, political and economic structures (Vertovec 2007; IOM 2020).

But apart from increased numbers, in the 21st century international migration has taken a further turn with wars, political (Arar et al. 2019, 2020a, 2020b; IOM 2020) and environmental crises (Adamo and Izazola 2010; Arar et al. 2020b; IOM 2020) emerging as factors for emigration besides economic motives. Indeed, the IOM's World Migration Report 2020 indicates that from

> the world's top 20 countries with the largest number of IDPs [internally displaced persons] displaced due to conflict and violence [...] at the end of 2018 [...] most countries were either in the Middle East or sub–Saharan Africa [...] [and the] Syrian Arab Republic had the highest number of people displaced due to conflict (6.1 million) [...]. (IOM 2020: 43)

Moreover, migration routes to Europe appear to be particularly perilous with the Mediterranean Sea claiming the highest numbers of deaths with at least 17,919 people out of 30,900 fatalities during migration recorded between 2014

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and 2018 (IOM 2020: 32). Hence, migrants may reach their destination with trauma both from experiences in their country of origin that have propelled them to leave, and with traumatic experiences during their migration journey.

Migration Patterns to and from Malta

Malta is a case in point of a country having witnessed a substantial increase in immigration in recent years (Bartolo, Galea and Azzopardi 2008; Bezzina and Vassallo 2019, and see Figure 1). From a population of 407,832 in 2008 it grew to 493,559 inhabitants in 2019. As can be seen in Figure 1, this increase was largely due to incoming mobility of migrant and stateless persons, which made up 14,725 in 2008 and 83,267 in 2019. Over the same period the Maltese population remained largely stable growing from 393,107 in 2008 to 410,292 in 2019. Indeed, the share of migrants and stateless persons in Malta more than quadrupled during that period from just 4% of the population in Malta in 2008 to 17% in 2019. This exceeds by far the share of migrants and stateless persons in Germany (12% in 2019), Italy (9% in 2019), the United Kingdom (9% in 2019) or France (7% in 2019) (EUROSTAT 2020) and the average in Europe (11%) as indicated by the World Migration Report 2020 (IOM 2020: 24), Moreover, one should bear in mind that Malta's population density is 1,322 inhabitants per square kilometre and, thus, far higher than that of the United Kingdom (244.3 inhabitants per square kilometre) or Italy (19.2 inhabitants per square kilometre) (NSO 2014). Malta is, therefore, at the same time one of the most densely populated and smallest countries in the world (Darmanin 2013; Seguna 2019). The increase in international population is, thus, seen and felt more intensely in Malta compared to geographically larger countries (Baldacchino 2003).

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Figure 1: Population of Malta on 1st January between 2008 and 2019 by broad group of citizenship
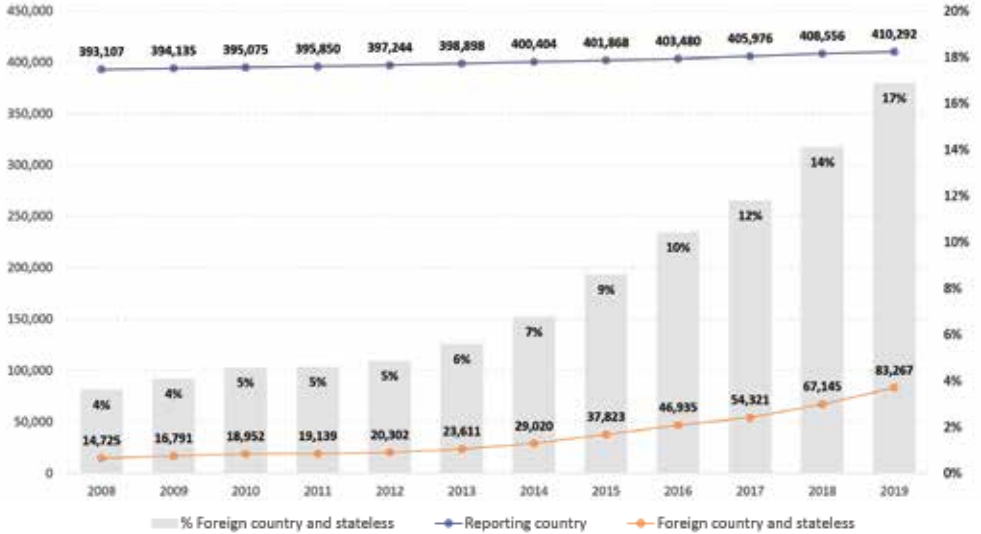
Source: EUROSTAT, [migr_pop2ctz]

How can this substantial increase in the international population in Malta be accounted for?

One reason may stem from Malta's membership in the European Union since 2004. This marked an important milestone for the island since, as Figure 1 demonstrates, a steady increase in the population has been evident. Between 2008 and 2018, within exactly a decade, Malta has witnessed an increase of 67,869 people inhabiting the island. This is in line with the World Migration Report 2020, which found that most international migrants within Europe were born in the same region (IOM 2020).

Another reason appears to be linked to Malta's strong labour market performance as evidenced by a high employment rate of 74.4% in quarter 2 of 2018 and a low unemployment rate of 4% in 2017 (European Commission 2019: 7). Indeed, various sectors have witnessed skills and labour shortages in recent years, such as the construction sector, finance, information and communication technology and healthcare (European
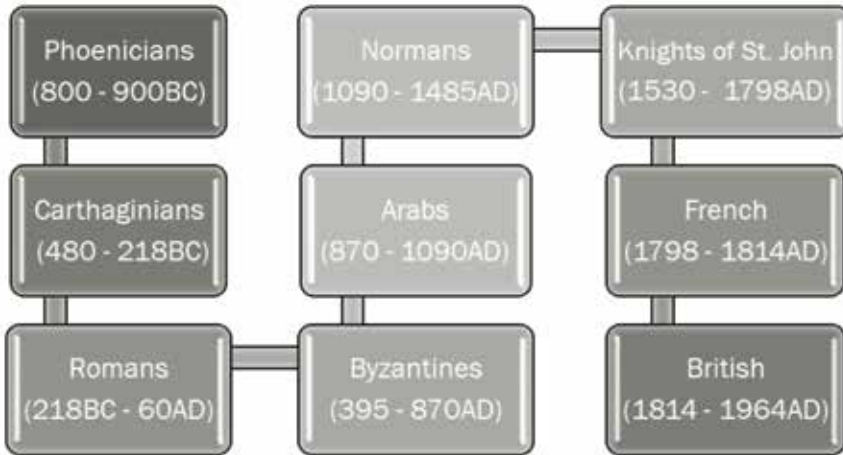
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Commission 2019). Skills and labour shortages are witnessed in high–skilled professions due to the persistent high level of under–qualification in Malta (26%) compared to that in the EU (22.8%) (European Commission 2019). As a result, the labour market relies heavily on international labour with the share of international workers having increased from 5.6% in 2008 to 19.2% in 2017 (European Commission 2019). Thus, economic pull factors in the Maltese economy may have contributed to increases in immigration to Malta. In line with Massey (1990), the networks maintained by these immigrants may have lowered the costs for others in their home country to resettle to Malta and have led to a critical mass of immigration that suggests a continued increase in the future.

Moreover, in line with migration patterns highlighted by Arar et al. (2019, 2020a, 2020b) and the World Migration Report 2020 (IOM 2020), in the past decade arrivals of refugees and asylum seekers who are fleeing their home country due to violent unrests and economic hardships (Bezzina and Vassallo 2019) have increased also in Malta. Seguna (2019) reports that the highest number of asylum applications were recorded in 2008 (2,607) and 2009 (2,389), while figures appear to be more stable in recent years (1,692 in 2015; 1,733 in 2016; 1,616 in 2017). Most applications are from individuals from Syria (436), Libya (409), Somalia (332), Eritrea (91) and Iraq (55) (Seguna 2019: 136), and a considerable share of applications are from children (397, 24.5%) or unaccompanied minors (14, 0.8%) (Seguna 2019). Hence, the motives and migration channels of migrants arriving in Malta are diverse and deserve in themselves further exploration, which the limited scope of this article cannot provide.

This recent increase in immigration may give the impression that Malta has been a fairly homogeneous population in the past, which is by no means the case (Frendo 2005). Indeed, like other islands, Malta has been subject to a series of colonial rulers throughout its long and rich history (see Figure 2) (Baldacchino and Royle 2010; Caruana et al. 2013). Each of these rulers left their mark on the island in terms of cultural, linguistic and religious heritage, and social, economic and political influences still felt in Malta today.

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Figure 2: Timeline of Maltese colonizers

Phoenicians (800 - 900BC)	Normans (1090 - 1485AD)	Knights of St. John (1530 - 1798AD)
Carthaginians (480 - 218BC)	Arabs (870 - 1090AD)	French (1798 - 1814AD)
Romans (218BC - 60AD)	Byzantines (395 - 870AD)	British (1814 - 1964AD)

Source: Seguna 2019

Besides colonial influences, large–scale emigration from Malta in the early 20th century in response to fears of overcrowding and search for better employment opportunities also left a mark on Maltese society and established cultural and economic ties with the hosting countries of Maltese migrants (Attard 1983, 1997, 1999). Cauchi (1999) reports emigration took place mainly to English–speaking countries in the 1920s and after World War II. Indeed, in the 1920s 87,000 (56%) moved to Australia, 32,000 (20%) to the UK, 20,000 (13%) to Canada and 11,600 (8%) to the US, while between 1946 and 1996, a total of 155,000 persons, namely 44% of the Maltese population, emigrated overseas (Cauchi 1999).

In essence, therefore, Maltese culture can be characterized as a culmination of these various international influences throughout its history, stemming from colonial rule, immigration and the links maintained by Maltese emigrating abroad. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the recent immigration and the short period of time in which it emerged have posed new challenges in terms of public perception and service provision, particularly in the education sector. It is for this reason that the article will further explore this impact in more detail.

Impact of Immigration on the Education Sector

As argued earlier, immigration has affected various sectors, including the educational sphere (Arar et al. 2020a, 2020b). This is true also for Malta. A comparison of the Censuses carried out in 2005 and 2010 (NSO 2007, 2014) demonstrates that in 2005 most migrants lived in the localities of St Paul's Bay and Sliema, while in 2010 Birżebbuġa also featured. These figures therefore had "a social, cultural, demographic and ethnic impact..." (Caruana Cilia 2014: 1) on these localities and the schools within them. As Seguna (2019) ascertains, "mobility has therefore had an impact on certain towns and villages in Malta with the consequence that an imbalance in the distribution of international learners across schools has occurred." (p. 161)

One of the principal aims of this paper is to study the data on student enrolments in compulsory education in public, church and private schools. This aspect, which the authors ascertain is of growing importance, has never been attempted in Malta. Unfortunately, data collection in Malta, such as that by the Ministry for Education and Employment, has not been meticulously compiled (Calleja et al. 2010; Falzon et al. 2012; Frendo 2005; Seguna 2019) since data has not been collected in a consistent or similar fashion over the years. It has also been collected by different entities within the Ministry for Education and Employment and the National Statistics Office. This has made the collation of data challenging and comparisons difficult. With no study having taken up such an enterprise, the authors believe that by delving into the data that has been collected over the years, the article may provide an overview of the development of international students in compulsory education in Malta and provide an analysis and interpretation of the data presented.

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International Learners in the Education Sector by School Sector Attended

As Figure 3 demonstrates, the total international learner population in Maltese schools has increased from 1,280 in Scholastic Year 2008–2009 to 5,640 in Scholastic Year 2017–2018. This means that within a decade the international learner population more than quadrupled, with substantial increases being witnessed in recent years. It is important to note that figures for the Scholastic Year 2014–2015 are unreliable.

It is evident that the number of international learners in Church schools is rather modest, with numbers increasing from 27 international learners in Scholastic Year 2008–2009 to 119 students in Scholastic Year 2017–2018. In state and private schools, a different scenario has been evident. State schools had 649 international learners in Scholastic Year 2008–2009, increasing more than six–fold to 4,203 in the Scholastic Year 2017–2018. Private schools, which make up the smallest sector in the educational sphere, already had a very large number of international learners in Scholastic Year 2008–2009 with 604 international learners. By Scholastic Year 2017–2018, the population of international students had increased to 1,318. When taking these numbers into consideration, it seems as though state schools have recorded the largest increase while the private sector has always had a steady influx of international learners. Articles in local newspapers have recently been commenting upon this increase. This public perception will be discussed in further detail later.

Looking in more detail at the composition of the international student population of State Schools (Figure 4), for which detailed data on students' nationalities is available from Scholastic Years 2008–2009 to 2019–2020, data reveals that majority of international students are EU nationals. However, in recent years the share of Non–EU students has been on the increase.

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Figure 3: Total international student population in Maltese schools by education sector
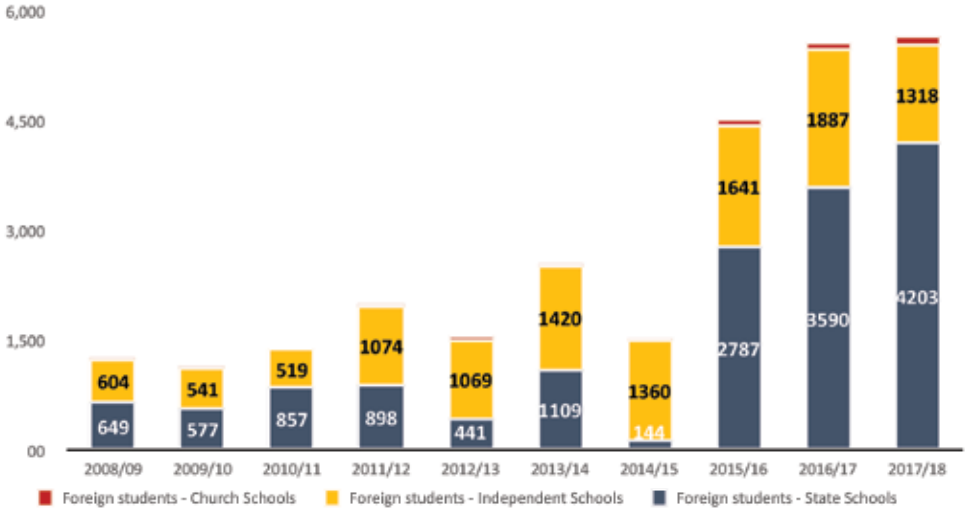
Source: Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability 2019; MEDE 2019

Figure 4: International student population in state schools
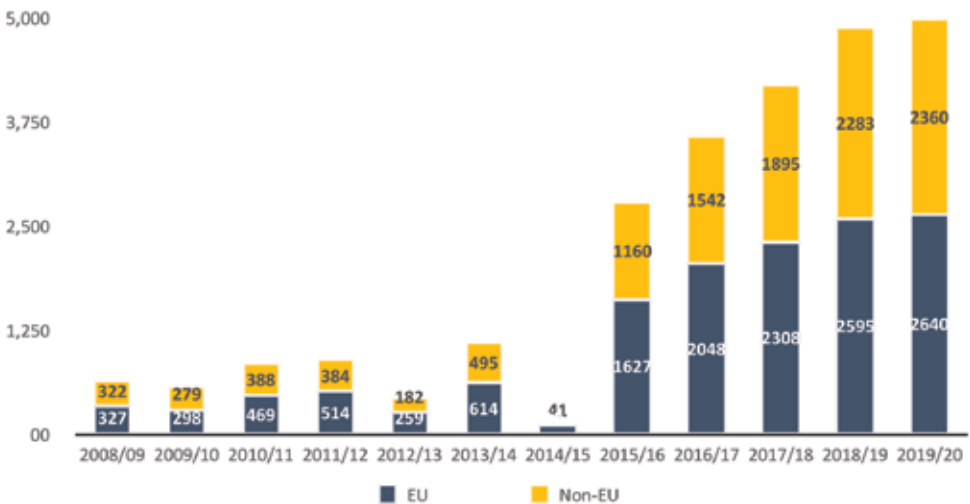
Source: Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability 2019; MEDE 2019

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Main Nationalities Observed in Maltese Schools

Over the years the nationalities in compulsory education have changed. As Table 1 indicates, learners coming from the United Kingdom have had systematically the highest recorded numbers in all sectors, apart from Italy, Russia and Bulgaria. The top nationalities were also mainly EU citizens in the private sector, while Non-EU students were being educated in state schools. From scholastic year 2012–2013 there has also been a change in the nationalities of learners being educated in Maltese schools. Being a colonized island for many years could be one explanation for Malta attracting citizens from countries such as the United Kingdom and Italy. By becoming an EU member state in 2004, Malta continued to attract EU citizens as the figures in Table 1 indicate. However, more recently, and with a change in Malta's leadership and direction, the main target has not only been Europeans. A bigger diversification of other nationalities away from the EU has been evident as reiterated by Arar et al. (2019, 2020a, 2020b) and Bezzina and Vassallo (2019), with growing numbers from Russia, Libya, Serbia and Syria.

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Table 1: Main nationalities in Malta by sector of education and year

2008-2009	United Kingdom	265	20.7%	2009-2010	United Kingdom	143	12.5%
	Bulgaria	43	3.4%		Italy	80	7.0%
	Italy	77	6.0%		Russia	67	5.9%
	Russia	65	5.1%		Bulgaria	45	3.9%
	Germany	40	3.1%		USA	35	3.1%
2010-2011	United Kingdom	395	28.3%	2011-2012	United Kingdom	431	21.5%
	Russia	96	6.9%		Russia	112	5.6%
	Bulgaria	94	6.7%		Bulgaria	103	5.1%
	Serbia	45	3.2%		Italy	80	4.0%
	Germany	37	2.6%		Germany	48	2.4%
2012-2013	United Kingdom	414	26.8%	2013-2014	United Kingdom	414	16.2%
	Russia	235	15.2%		Italy	199	7.8%
	Italy	113	7.3%		Libya	185	7.2%
	Bulgaria	97	6.3%		Russia	172	6.7%
	Libya	82	5.3%		Germany	68	2.7%
2014-2015	United Kingdom	493	11.9%	2015-2016	United Kingdom	706	11.1%
	Bulgaria	165	4.0%		Libya	555	8.7%
	Italy	132	3.2%		Italy	540	8.5%
	Libya	100	2.4%		Bulgaria	256	4.0%
	Syria	84	2.0%		Syria	217	3.4%
2016-2017	United Kingdom	767	14.2%	2017-2018	Italy	920	14.7%
	Italy	739	13.7%		United Kingdom	813	12.9%
	Libya	627	11.6%		Libya	571	9.1%
	Bulgaria	307	5.7%		Bulgaria	344	5.5%
	Serbia	224	4.1%		Serbia	336	5.4%

Source: Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability 2019; MEDE 2019; NSO 2020

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The Spatial Distribution of International Learners in Malta

Apart from analysing the overall increase in international learners in Malta and their countries of origin, it is also illuminating to study their spatial distribution in Malta. This is relevant since Massey (1990) has argued that links maintained by migrants with their home and host country lower the cost of immigration for others due to them having information on access to housing, amongst other things. It is, therefore, plausible to assume that this lowering in transactional cost translates into migrants settling in areas with an already existing population from their own home country. Moreover, Vertovec (2007) has argued that socio–cultural factors of migrants also influence their access to housing, work, services, identity and sense of belonging. The areas migrants settle could, therefore, give insight into their socio–cultural and economic background, since the availability of rental property and its cost in different localities of Malta will surely influence their place of residence.

Where, therefore, are migrants settling in Malta? And where do their children attend school? As stated above, the Censuses carried out in in Malta in 2005 and 2010 (NSO 2007, 2014) showed that in 2005 most migrants lived in the Northern and Northern Harbour area in the localities of St Paul's Bay and Sliema. By 2010 a considerable share of migrants also resided in the South Eastern area in Birżebbuġa. Regional statistics for the year 2017 (National Statistics Office, 2019) confirm again that the Northern, Northern Harbour and South Eastern districts of Malta record the highest shares of international residents. In addition, Gozo also witnessed considerable shares of international residents, with some localities reporting shares between 10–15% (see Figure 5). Since school attendance is based on the locality of residence, at least for state schools, higher concentrations of international students should, therefore, be observed in these regions and corresponding colleges.

Figure 5: Percentage of migrants to the total population of each locality: 2017

KEY

Percentage of
foreigners

- 0 - <5
- 5 – <10
- 10 – <15
- 15 – <25
- ≥25
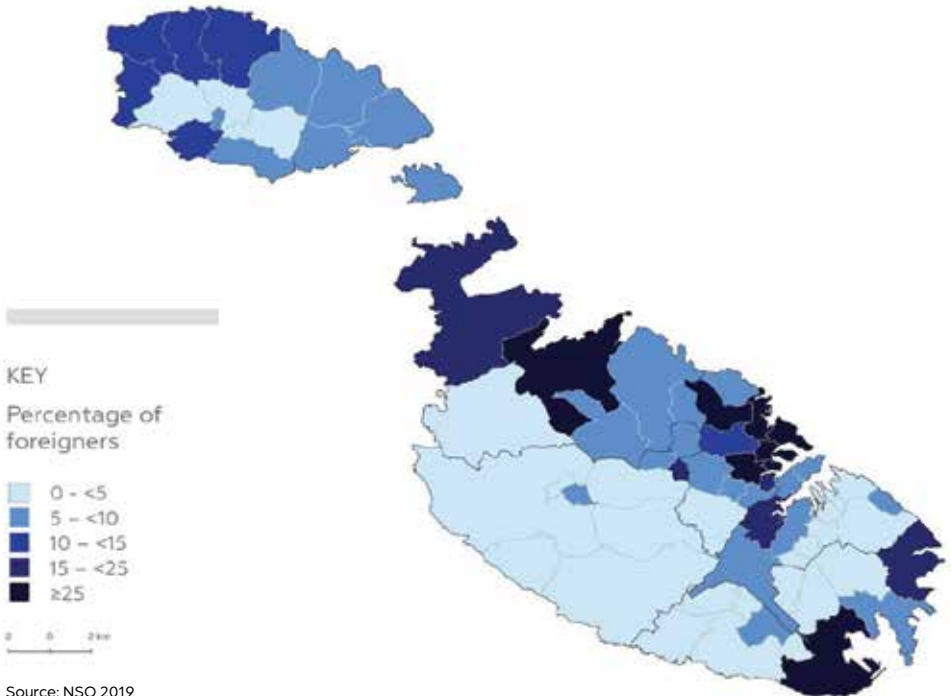
Source: NSO 2019

Unfortunately, data on the share of migrant residents by locality is not available for every year to allow for comparisons with the share of international learners in compulsory education. Moreover, data on the total population and the number of international learners was not available for state, church and private schools for all years. Hence, it was not possible to calculate the share of international learners among the total student population among state, church and private schools or the total population for all years. Moreover, while the locality of residence determines in state schools the college a student attends, this is not the case for church and private schools, which draw their student population from all over Malta. Hence, the location of the school is not connected to the place of residence of the student, making an analysis of the spatial distribution of international students in church and private

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schools limited. It is for this reason that the article focused on the analysis of the spatial distribution of international students in state schools, since for this sector data was available for Scholastic Years 2015–2016 to 2019–2020, both for the total student population and for the international learners.
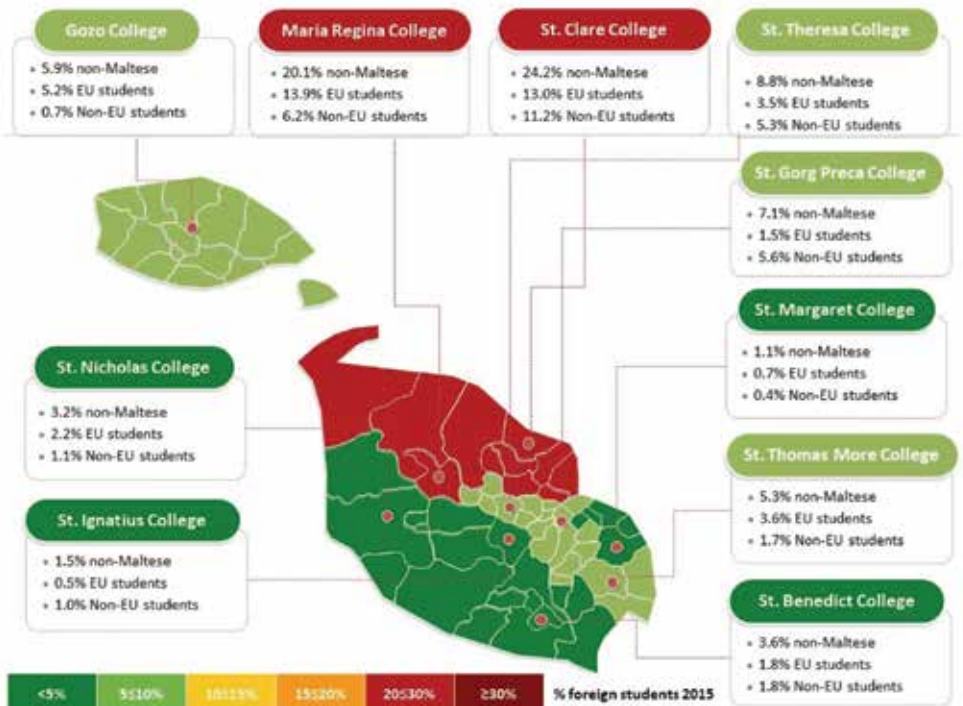
Figures 6 and 7 show the share of international learners by college and their country of origin – EU or Non–EU. As can be seen from these figures, the share of international learners has increased in all colleges within a span of five years. In some cases, it increased considerably, namely St. Clare College (from 24.2% in 2015–2016 to 35.7% in 2019–2020), Maria Regina College (from 20.1% in 2015–2016 to 28.5% in 2019–2020) and St. Theresa College (from 8.8% in 2015–2016 to 15.8% in 2019–2020). These colleges are based in the Northern and Northern Harbour area and, thus, the area with the consistently highest shares of migrant residents in Malta. The substantial increase of international learners in these colleges suggests that these areas have both the highest shares of migrant residents and that their share has increased most rapidly over the years compared to other areas in Malta. It is evident, therefore, that some colleges and schools forming part of them require specific support to cater to this substantial student population and the specific educational needs they may have. This is in line with the findings from Bezzina and Vassallo (2019), which highlight that school leaders in general feel rather helpless on how to integrate international learners. Moreover, they call for closer cooperation of schools and education authorities with local councils and nongovernmental organisations to facilitate integration of migrants in society (Bezzina and Vassallo 2019), which appears all the more relevant in view of the high concentration of migrant residents in particular areas in Malta.

It is also noteworthy that there are differences in the country of origin of international learners in different colleges across Malta. Colleges in the Northern Harbour (St. Theresa College), the Southern Harbour (St. Gorg Preca College), Western (St. Ignatius College) and South Eastern area (St. Benedict College) have higher shares of Non–EU students than EU students. This suggests that different localities in Malta attract migrant residents from specific countries or regions of origin and that this is reflected in the student population attending

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compulsory education in the college of that area. Again, this suggests that different colleges need specific support to cater to the needs of these students and their families.

Indeed, Figure 8 shows that the largest group of international learners in St. Theresa and St. Gorg Preca Colleges are Syrian (13.4% and 28.7% respectively) and that 19.1% of international students in St. Clare College are Libyan. These students may have witnessed conflict and trauma or may have missed several years of schooling before their arrival in Malta (Arar et al. 2019, 2020a, 2020b). Teachers, therefore, need adequate training to address both the educational and emotional needs of these students.
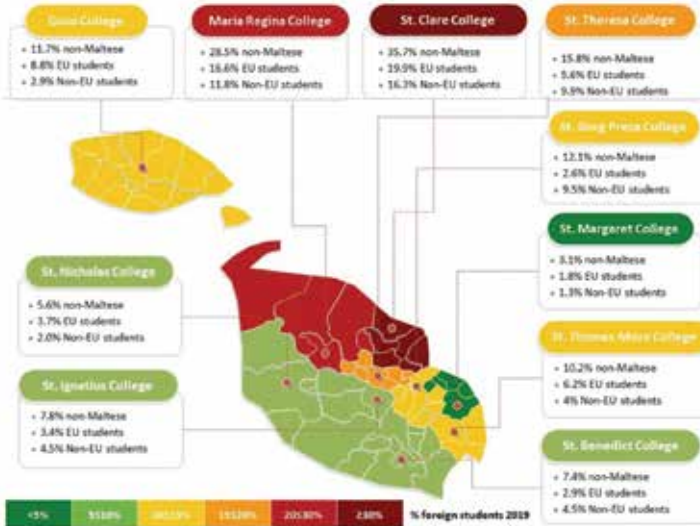
Figure 6: Share of international learners in state schools by college, 2015/2016

Gozo College
- 5.9% non-Maltese
- 5.2% EU students
- 0.7% Non-EU students

Maria Regina College
- 20.1% non-Maltese
- 13.9% EU students
- 6.2% Non-EU students

St. Clare College
- 24.2% non-Maltese
- 13.0% EU students
- 11.2% Non-EU students

St. Theresa College
- 8.8% non-Maltese
- 3.5% EU students
- 5.3% Non-EU students

St. Gorg Preca College
- 7.1% non-Maltese
- 1.5% EU students
- 5.6% Non-EU students

St. Margaret College
- 1.1% non-Maltese
- 0.7% EU students
- 0.4% Non-EU students

St. Nicholas College
- 3.2% non-Maltese
- 2.2% EU students
- 1.1% Non-EU students

St. Thomas More College
- 5.3% non-Maltese
- 3.6% EU students
- 1.7% Non-EU students

St. Ignatius College
- 1.5% non-Maltese
- 0.5% EU students
- 1.0% Non-EU students

St. Benedict College
- 3.6% non-Maltese
- 1.8% EU students
- 1.8% Non-EU students

<5% 5≤10% 10≤15% 15≤20% 20≤30% ≥30%   % foreign students 2015
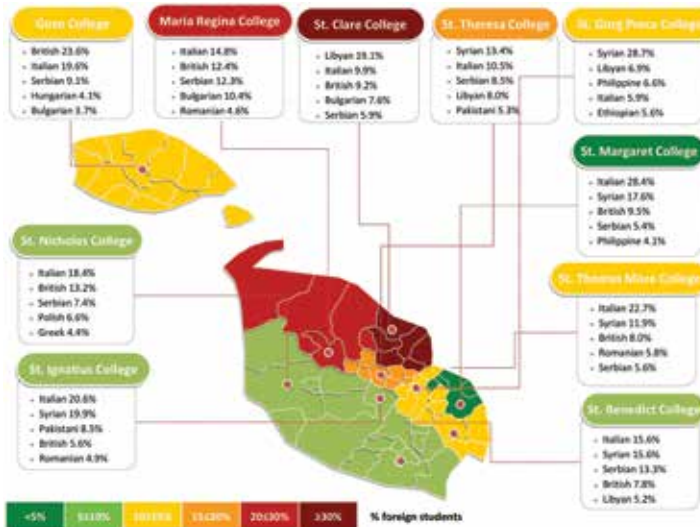
Source: MEDE 2019

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Figure 7: Share of international learners in state schools by college, 2019/2020

Source: MEDE 2019

Figure 8: Most common nationalities of international learners in state schools by college, 2019/2020

Source: MEDE 2019

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Public Perception

With such an increase in international residents on the island one questions its impact on the public perception, such as tolerance and openness towards others from diverse cultures. Bezzina and Vassallo (2019) have indicated school leaders' struggle with intolerant attitudes of parents and the wider community that hinder their work in integrating international students. This is in line with findings from the World Migration Report 2020, which argues that

> *while the nature of the public discourse has changed over time, there is widespread recognition that the "toxicity" of the migration debate has further intensified over the last few years, with the politics of fear and division increasingly framing discussions. Disruption and disinformation are increasingly deployed as part of tactical pursuits of power, with negative impacts on public, political and social media discourse, on societal values, and on public policy issues such as migration, displacement and migrants (including refugees) (IOM 2020: 161)*

Further literature analysis of recent research, studies and local newspapers has provided a broad overview of the perception within the Maltese community.

A recent study entitled 'A passage to Malta' (Cefai et al. 2019) explored the attitudes of Maltese students between the ages of 0 and 16, towards international children living in Malta. It illustrated that most international learners (80% and over) are highly engaged and included at school. However, 10% to 20%, especially those with difficulties in English or Maltese, do not always feel included.

The study showed that around one third of the learners had witnessed arguments and fighting within their classrooms and schools, especially in state schools and with students from Africa and the Middle East. Racial bullying was also witnessed, especially due to students' ethnic origin, religion or inability to speak the national languages fluently. The latter is in line with findings from Arar et al. (2020a) with experiences of

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international and refugee students in other countries. Cefai et al. (2019) also report that peers from the Western world were preferred, those from the Maghreb, the Middle East and sub–Saharan Africa were the least liked and mixed feelings were exhibited towards learners from Eastern Europe, the ex–Soviet Union and East Asia.

Learners in private schools had the most positive attitudes towards international learners, while students from Gozo were more negative. Moreover, younger students seemed to be more open to accepting international peers than older students. Although the majority of respondents were open to accepting others and learning about their peers' customs and traditions, one fourth to one third seemed to be resistant to intercultural integration and appeared "to be cautious or against full integration of foreigners in Malta" (Cefai et al. 2019: 18).

Two other studies focused upon migrants living in Malta, especially those from Africa and the Middle East (Zammit 2012; aditus 2013). Results showed that they felt a lack of trust in the authorities who were meant to be protecting their rights. In another two studies (Fsadni and Pisani 2012; Sammut et al. 2017), parents of international learners mentioned how they felt discriminated against. They also confessed that their family values and traditions were not always respected, especially within the community and social services.

From these studies and the negative attitudes which have emerged, it appears that the Maltese population seems to be incognisant of Malta's historical trajectory and that "externality management" (Baldacchino 2003) was crucial for its survival. The former Prime Minister, in his own words, had "campaigned against my own country joining the EU, but today acknowledges joining was the best decision we could have made..." ("Muscat urges" 2016). Therefore, one understands that big changes such as joining the EU, and their consequent repercussions such as migration, create fear and resistance. Just as Muscat had resisted joining the EU, the Maltese population also fear and are unsure of how the influx of citizens from other countries will affect the island. This seems to reiterate Baldacchino's (2003) belief that the Maltese face 'fears' of 'invasion' and is

also in line with Vertovec's (2018) argument that:

> *even slight but rapid diversification has notable effects. In places where a relatively small but fast influx of migrants have arrived, tendencies toward xenophobia are greatest. Therefore, it is not just the perceived size of migrant groups that affects people's assessments of change, but it is the pace of change that some find distressing. (Vertovec 2018: 2)*

Given that in Malta the increase in migrants has been both considerable and rapid, stronger repercussions in terms of public perception are probable, since Baldacchino (2003) reminds that due to Malta's size even relatively small numbers of migrants will have an impact on the island.

Concluding Remarks, Possible Policy Responses and Recommendations for Future Research

The paper aimed at presenting an overview of international learners in Maltese schools demonstrating the diversification of nationalities and the spread of these international learners across the island.

As the analysis of the statistics over the last decade has shown, the number of international learners within compulsory schools has increased drastically and will continue to increase. The data showed that the increase of international students is limited in church schools, has been consistently high in private schools, while it had a substantial impact on state schools.

Predominant countries of origin are those with close historical, cultural and geographic ties, namely Italy and the United Kingdom, apart from other EU member states. However, in recent years, immigration has increased from Non–EU countries and countries with political and economic upheavals, like Syria and Libya.

In terms of spatial distribution, state schools in the Northern, Northern Harbour and South Eastern districts have the highest shares of international students, due to high shares

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of international residents in these areas. Differences were also evident in the nationalities residing in these districts with some colleges having substantially higher shares of Non-EU students, particularly from Syria and Libya.

Finally, the public perception towards migrants and international students revealed negative attitudes, particularly among older students and towards international students from Africa and the Middle East. Likewise, migrants reported a lack of trust in authorities and felt subject to discrimination.

In view of these developments, it is extremely important for schools to work towards bringing about an inclusive environment. However, in view of the diverse impact identified, schools may require specific support to help students integrate, bearing in mind their educational and emotional needs. Support is particularly important for state schools, which have witnessed a particularly high and fast-paced impact, compared to church and private schools. Targeted support should be provided to colleges with particularly high shares of international students (St. Clare College and Maria Regina College) and colleges with recent stark increases in international students (St. Theresa College, San Gorg Preca College and St. Thomas Moore College). They need to be supported to create an inclusive education environment. Moreover, colleges with high shares of Non-EU students, particularly from Syria and Libya (St. Theresa College, San Gorg Preca College, St. Clare College, St. Margaret College, St. Benedict College and St. Ignatius College) should be supported to address not only the educational, but also the socio-emotional needs of their students. Further research is required to identify the specific support different colleges require in terms of educational, social and emotional needs of students and linking schools with families and communities. Qualitative research and case studies of integration practices, whether successful or less so, could provide useful insights into the support that is required and effective.

Support is also needed to address the public perception of migrant residents and integration of international students in schools, since the rapid and substantial increase in immigration has led to negative sentiments. The IOM (2020) recommends

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fostering a balanced public discussion and greater scrutiny of social media content, as well as taking due account of the contribution of migrants to the community, strengthening research on migrants and their integration in Malta, and harnessing the benefits of new technologies to support their integration. The authors also recommend that data collection on migrant nationals and international students is strengthened to allow for more detailed and comparable analyses in the future. It is, therefore, crucial for the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability to study how best to collect data in a systematic manner so that comparisons, projections and analyses are feasible. Moreover, it is important to collaborate closely with church and private schools in this regard to ensure that data collection on international students in compulsory education is comprehensive for all sectors. This will allow for policy responses and planning with the students in mind.

Lastly, while some studies (Falzon et al. 2012; Calleja et al. 2010; Seguna 2019) have been carried out in Malta on the perception of international students in compulsory education and good practices for their integration, further research is necessary. It is therefore important for the Ministry for Education and Employment and heads of school to examine the perceptions towards international learners and work towards inculcating a more inclusive and intercultural ambience.

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