

Total Quality Management in Post-Secondary Education in Malta

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Abstract

This study explored the perceptions of post-secondary educators in the Maltese islands regarding the potential of Total Quality Management (TQM) at this education level. It also sought to identify the factors considered important for enhancing the quality of education in their sector. A thematic analysis of local and international policies, documents, and studies related to TQM, particularly in post-secondary, was conducted. A questionnaire was distributed to all 258 educators across five post-secondary schools in Malta and Gozo. A total of 163 valid responses were received, highlighting themes of leadership and management, teaching and learning, and school ethos.

Keywords

Students, leadership, teaching, learning, ethos

Introduction

The Maltese state ensures free quality education at all levels, as this not only elevates economic growth but also drives productivity (Ministry for Finance and Employment, 2022). Education is what shapes the overall development of the citizens and impacts the trajectory of their lives in a variety of ways (Grima, 2023a). For these reasons, the nation prioritises quality education through multiple mechanisms. Within the Ministry for Education, a Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) has been established to regulate quality assurance in pre-compulsory and compulsory education that covers from 0 to 16 years of age (Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, 2014; MEYR, 2023a). According to the Education Act of 2006, the mission of the directorate is “to regulate, establish, monitor and assure standards and quality in the programmes and educational services provided by schools, whether state schools or not” (Legislation Malta, 2006, p. 9). This sentence has been kept in the revised chapter 605 of the Maltese legislation in article 12.1.c (Legislation Malta, 2022, p. 9). In addition, the Act mandates that the Directorate “regulates, guides, evaluates,

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verifies, researches and reports ... in order to promote good practices in all activities related to such education in a national framework of lifelong learning” (Legislation Malta, 2006, p. 10).

On the other hand, the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA) regulates quality assurance in further and higher education institutions according to chapter 607 of the revised Education Act (Legislation Malta, 2021). “Further” also includes post-secondary schools. At present, the MFHEA lacks the requisite infrastructure and quality assurance mechanisms to oversee post-secondary schools offering academic subjects. These institutions selectively incorporate and modify certain processes from both the DQSE and the MFHEA. Each post-secondary school can conduct its own internal review, tailoring the process to meet its unique requirements. As a fundamental part of the Framework for Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 (MEDE, 2014), and Assuring Quality in Education (Eurydice, 2015), post-secondary schools embrace a culture of self-evaluation based on the principles that go beyond the basic checklist approach (Privitelli & Bezzina, 2007). They all strive to continuously improve the quality of teaching and learning (Eurydice, 2015). In the absence of a specific framework, mechanisms or processes for post-secondary schools, this study explores the possible effectiveness of a philosophy called Total Quality Management (TQM) that is already being used successfully in a number of schools in other countries.

Quality Education

A key strategy that is highly emphasised to ensure quality education is continuous improvement and innovation within the educational landscape (Grima, 2023a). This approach is closely aligned with the philosophy of TQM introduced in the 1940s by W. Edwards Deming (1986). TQM is built on several core principles that collectively aim to improve organisational effectiveness and outcomes. These include continuous improvement, a strong customer (or student) focus, the active involvement of all employees, a process-oriented approach, and a commitment to systematic and strategic management (Khasanah et al., 2023; Neyestani, 2017; Sallis, 2002). These foundational principles serve as a guide for schools seeking to embed a culture of excellence and responsiveness to student needs. In the context of education, the “customer” is broadly interpreted to include students, parents, and society at large whose satisfaction depends on the effectiveness, inclusivity, and relevance of educational provision (Yusuf, 2023).

In the document *Visioning the Future by Transforming Education*, the Hon. Minister for Education, Dr Clifton Grima, states that “this strategy is not merely a document; it is a commitment to fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation within our educational landscape” (Grima, 2023b, p. 7). However, the focus of this document and its associated processes is primarily on the pre-compulsory and compulsory years of schooling. While it will undoubtedly influence the entire education system, there is currently no equivalent document specifically targeting the post-secondary sector.

Inspired by this document, the author seeks to explore whether the philosophy of TQM can provide common criteria to define quality at the post-secondary level. Specifically, this study evaluates the applicability of core TQM concepts, most notably Deming's Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle (Deming, 1986), the principle of continuous improvement, and the active collaboration of all educational stakeholders including the Senior Leadership Team, educators, and support staff. These concepts form the theoretical foundation of this investigation, which aims to empower schools to autonomously evaluate their internal improvement plans, thereby enhancing accountability and fostering development. Furthermore, the study examines the feasibility of adapting quality assurance mechanisms and processes that are currently implemented in pre-compulsory and compulsory education, to the post-secondary context. The ultimate goal is to achieve the highest standards of education through a holistic framework that integrates wellbeing and systematic quality enhancement.

Aim of Study

The main aim of this study is to explore the viewpoints of educators in post-secondary schools regarding whether the TQM philosophy can lead to ongoing enhancements in the quality of education.

The Research Question

Do educators at post-secondary schools think that TQM would raise the quality of education provided at this level?

Secondary Research Question 1: Do educators at the post-secondary level think that the theme identified in the literature about leadership and management as part of the philosophy of TQM contributes to higher quality education?

Secondary Research Question 2: Do post-secondary educators think that the theme identified in the literature about teaching and learning as part of the philosophy of TQM contributes to higher quality education?

Secondary Research Question 3: Are post-secondary educators of the opinion that the concept of school ethos, as outlined in academic literature and being an essential element of TQM philosophy, is instrumental in elevating the standard of education?

Literature Review

Educational Leadership and Management

Effective educational leadership is essential for ensuring quality within schools (Bush et al., 2019; Krein, 2023). Transformational leadership, which includes practices such as inspirational motivation and individualised support, has proven particularly effective (Xuereb, 2020). TQM further reinforces the need for collaborative leadership by engaging all stakeholders in continuous evaluation and strategic planning (Khasanah et al., 2023; Sallis, 2002). In this context, school leaders play a critical role in cultivating trust and shared responsibility (Bush, 2018), both of which are prerequisites for the successful implementation of TQM principles in Maltese post-secondary education. A leader who aims to raise the quality of the service given to the students must possess such attributes to motivate the educators to work together towards this common goal. To raise the quality entails the collaborative work of all stakeholders as presented in the document Quality Assurance Framework for Education in Malta (MEYR, 2023a). When the leader continuously involves all the staff in academic decisions, a culture of trust and collaboration is nurtured (Krein, 2023). It is only in a culture of trust that an educational leader can propose the introduction of TQM as they have full confidence in the professional abilities of the staff members.

Teaching and Learning

Teaching and learning processes lie at the heart of educational quality and are a central pillar in TQM frameworks (Slack & Lewis, 2020). In Malta, effective teaching is seen as a collective effort that requires coordination between educators delivering theory, tutorials, and practical sessions (MEDE, 2017). The successful integration of these components demands not only subject-matter expertise but also effective communication and planning across departments, guided by Heads of Departments (HoDs). According to Roy et al. (2021), continuous improvement in pedagogy, assessment, and curriculum delivery is essential for sustaining quality. TQM encourages a systemic approach to teaching and learning, emphasising student-centred practices, regular evaluation, and the adaptability of teaching strategies to meet learners' evolving needs (Khasanah et al., 2023; Terzi, 2020).

School Ethos

A school's ethos refers to its collective identity shaped by shared values, behaviours, and relationships. These play a fundamental role in promoting educational success and wellbeing. In Malta, the Quality Assurance Framework for Education (MEYR, 2023a) emphasises the importance of positive school climate, collaboration with parents, and community engagement as indicators of a strong ethos. When applied through the TQM lens, school ethos encompasses the alignment of the school's values with everyday practices and interactions (Sallis, 2002). This includes cultivating respectful relationships, prioritising student

support, and fostering an inclusive environment that encourages stakeholder participation. Research shows that a positive ethos contributes to student satisfaction, emotional resilience, and overall school improvement (Sfakianaki et al., 2021). Thus, embedding ethos into quality frameworks reinforces the holistic vision of education as a shared and values-driven mission.

Methodology

The study began with a comprehensive analysis of literature on TQM in post-secondary education, using primary and secondary sources. Based on this analysis, a quantitative web-based survey was developed to capture educators' perceptions regarding the relevance and feasibility of applying TQM principles within their schools. The design of the survey aligns with Deming's Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle by serving as the initial "Check" phase, systematically collecting feedback on current practices, beliefs, and perceived gaps. This approach supports the TQM philosophy of continuous improvement by providing a data-driven foundation for future planning ("Plan"), implementation of improvement strategies ("Do"), and subsequent evaluation ("Act"). Through this methodology, the study not only gathers empirical data but also reflects the iterative nature of quality enhancement that is central to TQM frameworks (Deming, 1986; Flores-Molina, 2011; Sallis, 2002).

Ethical considerations were central to planning the research process, with informed consent obtained from participants and strict adherence to confidentiality and anonymity protocols. The study was cleared by the MEYR, the Secretariat for Catholic Education, the Head of College Network, and all five Heads of School. Throughout the process, participants were assured of their autonomy, with clear communication about the research's purpose and findings. Safeguards were in place to ensure there was no risk of physical, moral, or business harm to the respondents or the schools involved.

Results and Discussion

Of the 258 educators targeted, 163 responded to the questionnaire, comprising 94 females and 69 males. The results indicate that there is no correlation between the replies and variables such as gender, age, or years of professional experience.

The primary research question of this study aimed to investigate post-secondary educators' perceptions of whether TQM can enhance the quality of education. The findings indicate a strong consensus, with 96.3% of respondents affirming the effectiveness of TQM in improving post-secondary education in Malta. This outcome is consistent with existing literature, which underscores TQM's potential to enhance both educational delivery and organisational performance (Bayraktar et al., 2013; Mosadeghrad, 2014; Slack & Lewis, 2020). More specifically, the aspects of TQM that educators found most effective included the emphasis on continuous improvement, teamwork, and stakeholder involvement. Many respondents recognised that quality enhancement is not a one-off initiative but an ongoing

process that requires systematic review and refinement of teaching practices, policy implementation, and institutional procedures. This aligns with Deming's notion of continuous improvement and iterative feedback cycles, which are fundamental to TQM (Deming, 1986; Neyestani, 2017). The collaborative dimension of TQM was also widely acknowledged. Educators highlighted the importance of coordinated efforts between staff involved in theory lessons, practicals, and tutorials, supporting a culture of shared responsibility and collegiality in decision-making processes. This echoes the principle that collective involvement from all levels of the school enhances cohesion and quality outcomes (Mosadeghrad, 2014; Sallis, 2002).

Furthermore, stakeholder involvement, including the participation of the Senior Leadership Team, educators, and support personnel, was seen as instrumental in driving school-wide improvements. Respondents appreciated that TQM creates a structured framework through which all stakeholders can contribute meaningfully to the school's goals, thereby fostering trust and mutual accountability. These elements reinforce the understanding that successful TQM implementation hinges on a unified commitment to high standards, professional development, and responsiveness to evolving educational needs (Khasanah et al., 2023).

Overall, the responses suggest that post-secondary schools in Malta are not only open to TQM but are already aligned with many of its foundational principles. The integration of continuous improvement, teamwork, and inclusive leadership practices positions these schools to benefit from adopting a structured TQM framework as a means of achieving sustained educational excellence.

Once it was established that TQM at the post-secondary level would raise the quality of education, respondents were asked to delve deeper into the themes that they perceive would contribute mostly to quality of education.

The study reveals a widespread agreement among respondents that effective leadership significantly impacts educational quality in post-secondary schools, with 89.6% affirming this view. This aligns with literature that consistently highlights the critical role of leadership in driving quality across organisations (Bush et al., 2019). In the context of TQM, effective leadership is essential not only for setting the strategic vision but also for fostering a culture of employee empowerment, stakeholder engagement, and continuous improvement (Deming, 1986; Sallis, 2002). Educators in this study recognised that when school leaders actively involve staff in decision-making and promote shared accountability, it enhances professional commitment and cohesion.

Modern educational leadership has moved beyond hierarchical models toward more collaborative approaches, such as transformational and situational leadership, which align closely with TQM principles (Bush, 2018; Reed, 2021). These leadership styles promote trust, open communication, and a commitment to collective goals. These are elements that are vital

for sustaining quality initiatives. For example, by empowering educators to take ownership of teaching practices and quality improvement processes, leaders reinforce the TQM ethos of learning and adaptability. Similarly, engaging all stakeholders in the development and evaluation of school policies supports a shared vision and accountability framework that aligns with continuous improvement cycles. Thus, leadership not only influences the school's vision and ethos, but actively enables the implementation of TQM by creating the conditions necessary for its success.

Another secondary research question explored educators' views on teaching and learning. The high level of agreement (98.8%) confirms a strong consensus that these are foundational to educational quality in post-secondary schools. This supports TQM literature that identifies curriculum planning, teaching strategies, and assessment as key areas for quality improvement (Bayraktar et al., 2013; Roy et al., 2021).

Educators' emphasis on collaboration, scaffolding, and inclusive curriculum development reflects core TQM principles such as continuous improvement, teamwork, and student orientation. For example, collaborative assessment practices demonstrate employee teamwork, while differentiated teaching and scaffolding reflect a student-centred approach tailored to diverse needs (Farooq et al., 2007). The process of regularly reviewing and adapting teaching methods aligns with Deming's cycle of continuous improvement (Deming, 1986; Khasanah et al., 2023).

The above findings suggest that educators value iterative feedback and development to raise standards central to TQM's commitment to sustained quality (Mosadeghrad, 2014). This proactive stance echoes Bush et al.'s (2019) view that leadership should foster environments where pedagogical excellence and professional growth are prioritised. As noted by Asif et al. (2016), such educator-driven efforts directly enhance school's effectiveness, reinforcing the relevance of TQM as a framework for continuous educational improvement.

The third secondary research question aimed to investigate educators' perspectives on the extent to which the school ethos influences the quality of education delivered to students. The results reveal that 93.3% of participants consider a cohesive and well-defined school ethos to be fundamental in improving educational standards. Ethos refers to the collective intentions, conduct, and interactions of school members, as well as their relationships with key stakeholders such as parents, who form an essential part of the wider school community (MEYR, 2023a). A commonly shared ethos nurtures a sense of belonging and responsibility, resonating with the principles of TQM, which stress the importance of collaboration, mutual trust, and a unified commitment to quality improvement (Mosadeghrad, 2014). A positive school ethos contributes to a work environment where staff feel aligned with the institution's mission, thereby enhancing their motivation and fostering a collective pursuit of excellence.

The significance of school ethos in supporting quality aligns with transformational leadership practices that shape a school culture focused on mutual respect, empowerment, and shared goals. Transformational leaders, who employ empathy, inspirational motivation, and collaborative decision-making, reinforce a positive ethos that supports TQM's values of continuous improvement and stakeholder engagement (Bush, 2018). In Malta, transformational leadership has been essential during key educational reforms, helping schools maintain a cohesive and quality-driven identity (Xuereb, 2020). This leadership style not only unites staff but also creates an atmosphere where the commitment to quality improvement is shared and sustained.

A strong ethos, therefore, forms the foundation for implementing TQM initiatives effectively. By engaging all members of the school community and fostering trust, leaders can encourage participation in quality improvement efforts, establishing an environment where each individual's contributions align with the school's objectives. This ethos-driven approach builds a culture that supports TQM by uniting personal and professional values with the school's mission, ensuring that educational quality is continuously upheld and advanced.

To explore educators' perceptions of TQM in their schools, respondents were asked to evaluate sub-themes under leadership and management, teaching and learning, and school ethos. The findings revealed strong consensus on the importance of these themes in enhancing educational quality.

In leadership and management, educators emphasised the need for a shared school mission, vision, and values, co-constructed by all staff. They also stressed the importance of ethical values, pedagogical leadership, and continuous professional development. Effective resource management, flexible learning programmes, and partnerships with other institutions were considered essential for fostering TQM practices. Additionally, staff recognition, professional fulfilment, and adaptive problem-solving were seen as crucial for embedding TQM in school leadership.

Regarding teaching and learning, educators highlighted the significance of well-planned lessons with clear outcomes, collaborative planning, and differentiated support for students. They also valued student motivation, autonomy, and the development of 21st-century skills. Scaffolding and active participation were identified as key pedagogical strategies, and continuous evaluation and improvement were emphasised as essential to sustaining high-quality teaching.

In terms of school ethos, educators supported the creation of a fulfilling professional environment and the establishment of healthy, empathetic relationships between staff and students. Inclusivity, high expectations for student performance, and platforms for student voice, such as a Student Council, were seen as integral to fostering a positive school culture that supports TQM principles.

Overall, the study found strong support for TQM across all themes, with 96.3% of respondents in favour of adopting TQM as a guiding philosophy. Educators advocated for staff-wide involvement in strategic planning, setting SMART objectives, and continuously monitoring and evaluating school development plans to ensure sustained quality improvement.

Limitations of the Study

While the findings of this study provide valuable insights into educators' perceptions of TQM within post-secondary education in Malta, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the study relied solely on a self-report questionnaire, which may have introduced response bias. Participants might have responded in a socially desirable manner or interpreted items differently, potentially affecting the accuracy and reliability of the data.

Secondly, the generalisability of the findings is inherently limited due to the study's specific focus on the Maltese post-secondary educational context. Although Malta shares some educational characteristics with other European systems, its unique size, structure, and policy framework mean that the results may not be directly transferable to other international schools without a number of considerations.

Thirdly, the absence of a qualitative component restricts the depth of understanding that could have been gained through open-ended responses, interviews, or focus groups. Such methods could have provided richer explanations and contextual interpretations of the survey results, shedding further light on the practical challenges and opportunities related to the implementation of TQM in schools.

Conclusion

This study confirmed that post-secondary educators in Malta view TQM as a valuable approach to enhancing educational quality. Addressing a notable gap in local research, the findings revealed strong support for the core themes identified in the literature: leadership and management, teaching and learning, and school ethos. Educators identified several key TQM principles as particularly relevant. Continuous improvement was evident in their call for ongoing evaluation and refinement of practices. Stakeholder collaboration was viewed as essential, with emphasis on inclusive leadership and cross-departmental teamwork. Support for structured planning and evaluation reflected the PDCA cycle, while systematic management was seen as crucial for aligning resources, goals, and staff development.

Policy Implications

The findings carry important implications for educational policy in Malta. As current national quality frameworks largely target compulsory education, there is a pressing need

to develop equivalent mechanisms for the post-secondary sector. This study supports the adoption of a TQM-based quality assurance framework tailored to the local context. Policymakers can incorporate principles such as continuous improvement, collaborative planning, and stakeholder accountability to ensure coherence and sustainability across the educational system.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should adopt qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups to gain deeper insight into educators' views and the motivations behind their responses (Saunders et al., 2007). Research should also explore student perspectives to provide a more holistic understanding of educational quality.

Further investigation could focus on the practical application of TQM principles in schools. For example, future studies might examine how Deming's PDCA cycle functions in practice or assess the role of continuous improvement teams in driving change. Continuous improvement teams are small groups of staff who work collaboratively to identify problems, propose solutions, and implement changes to enhance school performance. Research into collaborative staff structures that promote shared ownership and into professional dialogue would also contribute to a deeper understanding of TQM's impact in educational settings. These insights could inform the development of a robust, context-specific quality assurance framework for the post-secondary sector in Malta.

Practical Implementation Strategies

Alongside research efforts, this study recommends practical steps for embedding TQM in post-secondary schools. Schools might pilot the PDCA cycle as part of their school development planning and internal reviews. Establishing professional learning communities or continuous improvement teams could foster reflective practice and shared leadership. In addition, targeted Continuing Professional Development (CPD) sessions on TQM principles, alongside leadership workshops for senior staff, can strengthen institutional effectiveness and leadership competence. These initiatives would support a gradual transition toward a formal, locally responsive quality assurance framework.

Notes on Contributor

Josephine Ebejer Grech graduated with a B.Ed. (Hons) in Biology Education from the University of Malta. She later pursued a Master of Business Administration (MBA) at the Central Mediterranean Business School (CMBS) Malta, in collaboration with Coventry University London, and a Master in Applied Educational Leadership (MAEL) at the Institute for Education Malta. Currently, she is studying for her doctoral degree, specialising in the wellbeing and academic resilience of post-secondary students.

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