
Characteristics of Teacher Trainee Students in Malta and Their Readiness for the Labour Market

Christine Fenech , Genise Formosa

Abstract

In view of challenges related to global teacher shortages as well as teacher shortages and attrition in Malta, attracting individuals to the teaching profession and retaining them is crucial. In this regard, students' personal life has been identified as the strongest predictor of resilience in Maltese teacher trainee students besides self-efficacy, social and emotional competence, and self-efficacy in behaviour management. Therefore, the objective of this research is to investigate the social and economic conditions of teacher trainee students in order to understand their specific needs and evaluate the extent to which these needs are being met through present education programmes in Malta. This research focuses on the profile of teacher trainee students (n=142) based on the overall EUROSTUDENT VII dataset for Malta (n=1,226). Considering the factors that influence teacher trainee students' resilience, the research investigates teacher trainee students' satisfaction with their workload related to studies and paid work and difficulties encountered related to studies, work and personal life. It will also explore teacher trainee students' self-reported readiness for the labour market.

Keywords

Teacher trainee students, higher education, social and economic conditions, assessment of studies, resilience

Introduction

Attracting and retaining teachers into the profession has been of concern not only internationally (Shanks et al., 2022) but also in Malta (Arena, 2022; Attard, 2022; Farrugia, 2022), with research investigating the factors for attracting and retaining individuals in the teaching profession (Attard Tonna & Calleja, 2021), strengthening teacher self-efficacy (Coppini Charles, 2018) as well as factors contributing to teacher attrition (Galea, 2020).

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Teacher shortage and teacher attrition have become of concern in view of resulting initiatives of recruiting educators to fill the gap. In this regard, one of the government's initiatives has been the introduction of the grade of supply teachers, who do not have to meet all requirements to obtain the teaching warrant, raising concerns regarding the impact on the quality of education provision, given that 21% and 29% of newly recruited educators in state schools in the academic years 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 were employed in the grade of supply teacher (Galea, 2020). Attracting and retaining teachers and addressing teacher attrition is, therefore, a key concern.

Research by Attard Tonna and Calleja (2021) found that educators in Malta were mainly driven by altruistic motives compared to international research, which identified intrinsic motivation as the main source of motivation to join the teaching profession. However, they also argue that educators' motivation is fluid and changes over time, influenced by three key factors, namely education policy and its implementation, the school culture, as well as the perceptions of educators and overall conditions in society. Concretely, opportunities for career progression and income increases, educators' sense of agency, respect towards the teaching profession and increased stress resulting from policy reforms and demands imposed on educators and schools resulting from changes in society are influencing educators' motivation to remain in the profession (Attard Tonna & Calleja, 2021).

Indeed, Malta has witnessed considerable increases in its population in the past decade by nearly one quarter from 417,546 in 2012 to 516,100 in 2021 (EUROSTAT, 2022). According to the same source, this was mainly due to an increase in migration, with the share of non-Maltese residents among the total population increasing from 5% to 20% between 2012 and 2022 (EUROSTAT, 2022). This increase contributed to a diversification of the student population in compulsory education as evidenced by data by the National Statistics Office on pre-primary, primary and secondary formal education (NSO, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022) with the non-Maltese student population increasing from 4.5% in 2012/2013 to 13.9% in 2020/2021 (NSO, 2018, 2021, 2022). As Attard Tonna and Calleja (2021) point out, educators are expected to cater for this diversification and compensate for any disadvantages among learners, resulting in increased demands on educators.

This puts into question the self-efficacy of educators to respond to these

demands, particularly of those educators, who are not fully qualified teachers (Coppini Charles, 2018). Indeed, Coppini Charles (2018) found that these educators are more likely to harbour doubts about their self-efficacy to support disadvantaged learners compared to fully qualified teachers and that this self-efficacy is linked to the specialized knowledge obtained during initial teacher training. Bearing this in mind and the increasing demands faced by teachers, it also raises concerns about the effectiveness of recruiting not fully qualified teachers into the grade of supply teachers to address teacher shortages as indicated by Galea (2020).

Besides increased demands on educators, Galea (2020) argues that teacher attrition is linked to health, family, education, retirement or alternative employment. The same source suggests that individual characteristics like gender, age, family, ethnicity and psychological factors; qualification, such as pre-service education, academic ability, specialisation and teaching experience; school quality, including infrastructure and resources, administrative support, induction, leadership, collegiality, working conditions, salary and career opportunity; student population, including their academic achievement, socio-economic and socio-cultural background; school sector and external factors, like policy and reform, parents and society's perception and expectations of teachers played a crucial role in teacher attrition (Galea, 2020).

Thus, various factors have increased the demand for as well as demands posed on teachers. It is good to note, therefore, that in the past five years enrolments in the field of education more than doubled from 1,113 to 2,764 between 2015/2016 and 2020/2021, and the number of graduates nearly tripled from 348 to 943 over the same period, as evidenced by data by the National Statistics Office on students in post-secondary and tertiary education as well as graduates (NSO, 2020, 2021, 2022). The diversification of education providers (Attard Tonna & Calleja, 2021) may have contributed to this development, with enrolments in non-university programmes in the field of education increasing from 5% to 55% between 2016 and 2019, and part-time enrolments in teacher education programmes increasing from 27% to 51% over the same period (EUROSTUDENT VI and VII).

The review of the available literature shows that research in Malta has mainly focused on the factors attracting and retaining individuals in the teaching profession (Attard Tonna & Calleja, 2021), evaluating teacher self-

efficacy (Coppini Charles, 2018) or understanding the factors contributing to teacher attrition (Galea, 2020). However, research into teacher trainee students' preparation and resilience as potential future teaching staff is limited. This paper seeks to fill this gap and is basing itself on the findings by Peixoto et al. (2018), who identified students' personal life as the strongest predictor of resilience in Maltese teacher trainee students besides self-efficacy, social and emotional competence and self-efficacy in behaviour management.

Methodology

The present research seeks to fill the gap regarding the profile of teacher trainee students in Malta, challenges encountered by them, their perception of their studies as well as their labour market preparation. Concretely, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the profile of teacher trainee students in Malta?
2. What are the challenges encountered by teacher trainee students in Malta?
3. How do teacher trainee students assess their studies, conditions of studies and labour market preparation?

The study investigates these research questions based on the EUROSTUDENT VII dataset for Malta (n=1,226), which includes data from teacher trainee students (n=142). The analysis is based on the aggregated data available in the EUROSTUDENT database given that microdata was not accessible to the researchers. The study employed descriptive statistics of teacher trainee students and compared these to descriptive statistics of students of other fields of study as well as the total student population to analyse the specific profile, challenges encountered and assessment of studies and labour market preparation of students enrolled in the field of education compared to students enrolled in other fields of study. The analysis of these aspects formed the basis for evaluating students' personal life as a predictor of their resilience (Peixoto et al., 2018) to arrive at recommendations to improve study and living conditions and resilience of teacher trainee students to further attract and retain individuals into the teaching profession.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics

The data on demographic characteristics indicates that teacher trainee students in Malta have a distinct profile compared to students enrolled in other fields of study. When comparing the average profile of students in Malta based on the data for the total student population, students enrolled in programmes in the field of education are predominantly older (mean age of 29.8 years) compared to the total student population (mean age of 27.1 years). In fact, 37% are aged 30 years or older compared to 23% of the total student population. Teacher trainee students are also predominantly female (90% compared to 58% of the total student population) and follow their programme alongside childcare responsibilities (31% compared to 17% of the total student population). They appear to be entering significantly more often through alternative access routes (29% compared to 25% among the total student population), with a delay (mean age of 24.9 years compared to 21.9 years among the total student population) of more than two years from obtaining their secondary school qualification (35% compared to 24% among the total student population) and after having worked continuously for at least one year without interruption and at least 20 hours per week (49% compared to 35% among the total student population). Indeed, the majority of teacher trainee students follow their programme part-time (51%, compared to 30% among the total student population) and with work commitments throughout the entire semester (73% compared to 51% among the total student population), besides their family commitments. However, 83% of teacher trainee students working alongside their studies indicate that their job is (very) closely related to their studies compared to 55% among the total student population. This may reflect the recruitment of supply teachers, as from academic years 2017/2018 as indicated by Galea (2020). Since supply teachers do not hold all required qualifications to be eligible for the teacher warrant, they may be following a teacher trainee programme to obtain the required qualification.

Challenges Encountered

Students' Time Budget. Keeping in mind these differences in the demographic profile of teacher trainee students, the question arises as to how these students assess their time budget for study and work-related activities compared to other students.

Although 27% of students in education express the wish to spend less time on taught studies compared to 22% in the total student body, no statistically significant differences were evident in the satisfaction with time spent on taught studies of students enrolled in different fields of study, with a Pearson Chi-square p-value of 0.19. In comparison, significant differences were evident in the satisfaction with the time budget for personal studies of students enrolled in different fields of study, with a Pearson Chi-square p-value of 0.000. Overall, 14% of the total student body would like to spend less time on personal studies, while 48% would like to spend more time. When comparing this with the satisfaction with time spent on taught studies it appears that students would like to spend less time on taught lessons and more on personal studies. While the same pattern is evident among students from all fields of study, students enrolled in the field of education report significantly lower shares of students wishing for less (12%) or more (30%) time spent on personal studies. It appears, therefore, that students enrolled in the field of education consider the time spent on personal studies overall sufficient, while wishing for less time spent on taught studies.

Significant differences are also evident in the satisfaction with the time budget spent on paid jobs of students enrolled in different fields of study, with a Pearson Chi-square p-value of 0.028. Overall, 15% of the total student body would like to spend less time on paid jobs, while 36% would like to spend more time. Students enrolled in the field of education report wishing to spend significantly more time on paid jobs (45%). This may be linked to higher financial commitments considering their age and family responsibilities. Besides that, these family and work commitments (with average time spent in paid jobs of 30 hours per week for those working regularly during term time) alongside their studies are likely a strain on students enrolled in this field. This is likely resulting in the desire to prioritise and focus more strongly on work commitments in line with their self-definition, which is significantly more often as worker (73%) rather than as student.

Students' Financial Situation. Despite significantly higher shares of employment during term time among students enrolled in the field of education, they assess themselves significantly more often as having (very) serious financial concerns (43%) compared to the total student population (30%). Moreover, they assess their financial situation as significantly different from that of students enrolled in Business administration and law, who consider

themselves more often not (at all) in financial difficulties (43%), with a Pearson Chi-square p -value of 0.028. Thus, although students enrolled in Education and Business administration and law are both working significantly more often (73% and 57% respectively) than students enrolled in other fields of study (51% among the total student population), it appears that they judge their financial situation quite differently. This may be linked to the level of positions held and the associated remuneration in teaching or managerial positions, particularly in teaching positions that are in supporting roles, like supply teachers (Galea, 2020), rather than regular positions.

Student Mobility. Students enrolled in programmes in the field of education report significantly fewer mobility experiences abroad (12%) compared to the total student population (20%). In view of the increasing diversification of the student body due to considerable increases in the migrant population in Malta in the past decade from 4.6% to 20.1% between 2011 and 2021 (EUROSTAT, 2022), it is unfortunate that students enrolled in the field of education seem to participate less often in mobility experiences abroad. These could provide them with important skills to foster intercultural education and the integration of migrant children. However, bearing in mind the family and work commitments of students enrolled in programmes in the field of education, it is likely difficult for them to undertake such experiences, unless they are of short-term duration.

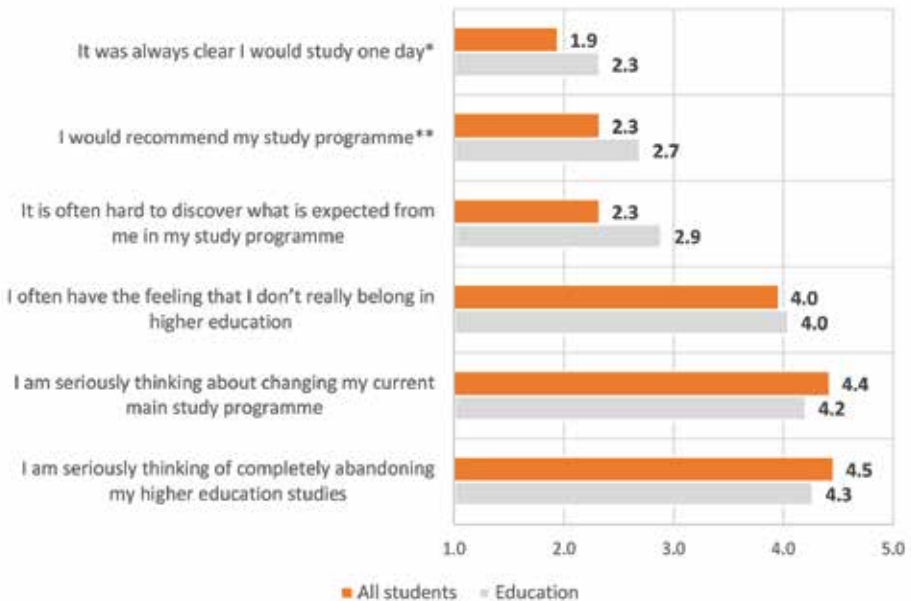
Assessment of Studies and Labour Market Preparation

Study Setting and Content. Students were asked to rate various aspects of their study setting and content from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (do not agree at all) as shown in Figure 1. Overall, students in higher education always intended to undertake studies at higher education level (mean rating score of 1.9) and would also generally recommend their study programme (mean rating score of 2.3).

Students enrolled in the field of education rate both statements more reservedly, with mean rating scores of 2.3 and 2.7 respectively. This may be linked to students enrolled in this field being more often non-traditional students that have entered higher education at a later point, for example to obtain the qualification required to obtain the teaching warrant or to progress in their career in the education sector. Thus, without the opportunity to take up employment in education through a supporting role (Galea, 2020) or advance their career in education they may not have chosen to enter higher education, which may have contributed to a more reserved assessment.

Figure 1

Students' Assessment of Various Aspects Related to their Study Setting and Content (Students of Education Compared to All Students)



Note: 1 = Strongly agree; 5 = Do not agree at all; *Chi-square p-value=0.008; **Chi-square p-value=0.002

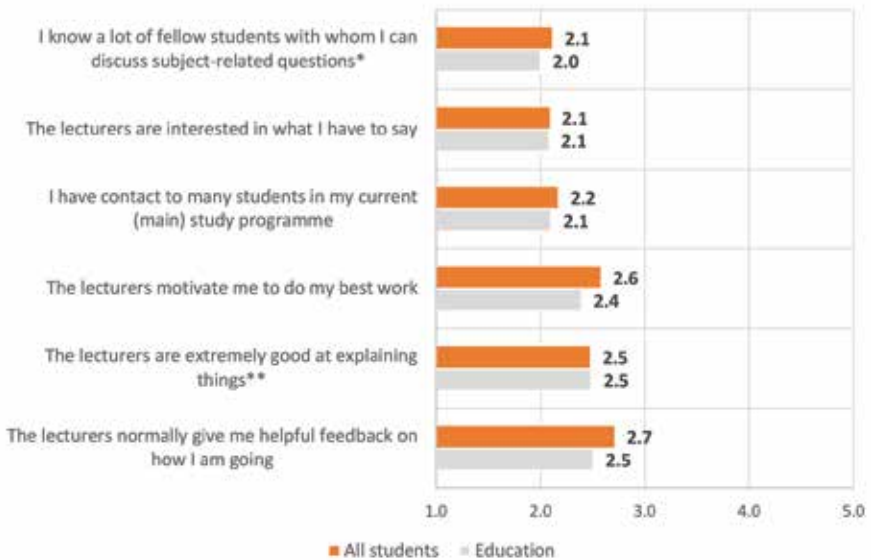
Students enrolled in programmes in the field of education are also more often employed throughout the entire lecture period and self-identify more often as a worker rather than as a student. They also have childcare commitments more often. Thus, their work and family commitments, along with commitments arising from their studies, might result in considerable constraints to balance work, studies, family life and personal recreation. Indeed, 27% of students enrolled in programmes in the field of education wish for less time spent on taught studies compared to 22% among the total student population. It appears, therefore, that flexible study arrangements are needed to accommodate the needs of these students, which may be the cause of the more reserved feedback regarding the recommendation of their study programme.

On the other hand, it is positive to note that students enrolled in the field of education do not feel they don't belong in higher education (mean rating score of 4.0) or have plans to either change their study programme (mean rating score of 4.2) or abandon their studies altogether (mean rating score of 4.3). This may be linked to their qualification being a requirement to obtain the teaching warrant and advance to a regular teaching post (Galea, 2020) or advance in their career to a headship position. However, it also indicates students' self-efficacy, which is one of the factors predicting the resilience of teacher trainee students in Malta identified by Peixoto et al. (2018).

Lecturers and Fellow Students. Students were also asked to rate various aspects related to their lecturers and their fellow students from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (do not agree at all) as indicated in Figure 2. Overall, students assessed their contacts with fellow students better (meant rating score of 2.1) than their lecturers' abilities to explain things (mean rating score of 2.5), motivate students to do their best work (mean rating score of 2.6) or provide them with helpful feedback on how they are performing (mean rating score of 2.7).

Figure 2

Students' Assessment of Various Aspects Related to their Lecturers and Fellow Students (Students of Education Compared to All Students)



Note: 1 = Strongly agree; 5 = Do not agree at all; *Chi-square p-value=0.04;
 **Chi-square p-value=0.02

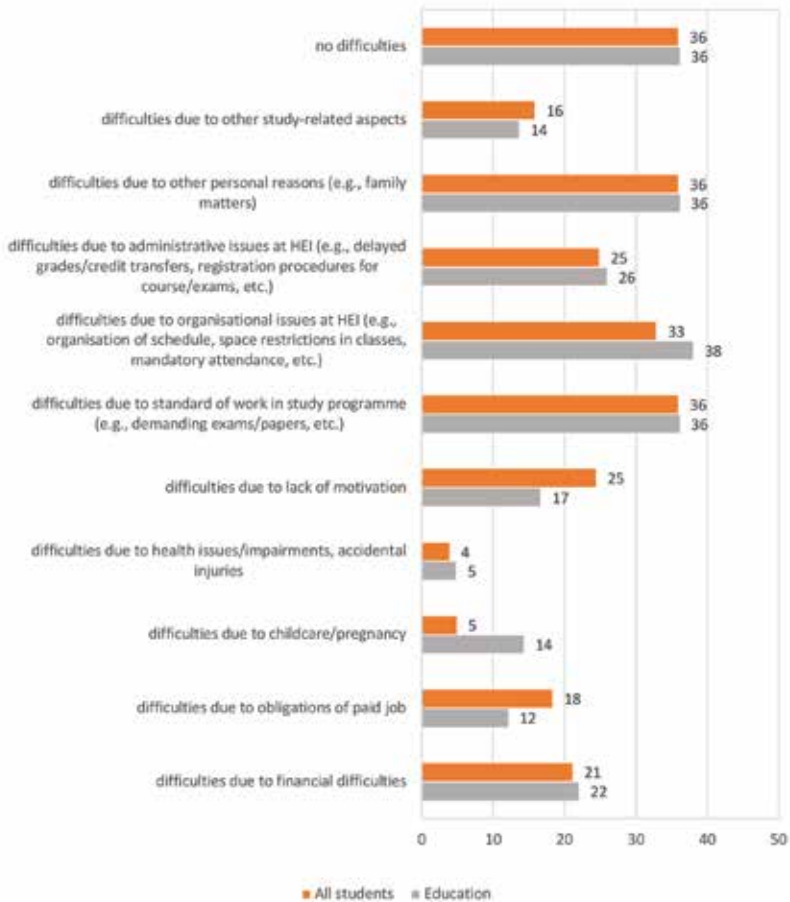
Students enrolled in the field of education report significantly more often that they know many of their fellow students (mean rating score of 2.0), while they take on a middle position regarding their assessment of their lecturers being good at explaining things (mean rating score of 2.5). Overall, it is positive to note that students enrolled in the field of education judge all aspects either as good as or better than the total student population. This shows that they assess their relationship with their lecturers and fellow students generally positively, which is important since peer support and support from lecturers are important to foster self-efficacy and, in turn, resilience.

Difficulties in Study Programme. Students assessed various difficulties they've encountered related to their studies and personal life. The highest

shares of students witnessing study-related difficulties are among those enrolled in the field of education (34%), compared to 21% of the total student population.

Figure 3

Students' Experience of Specific Difficulties in % by Field of Study of Students (Students of Education Compared to All Students)



Note: HEI: Higher Education Institution

When analysing the specific difficulties encountered by students enrolled in the field of education compared to all students (Figure 3), it emerges that the standard of work in the study programme and organisational issues at the higher education institution cause the most considerable difficulties for students, with 36% and 38% respectively. Since students in the field of education are more often non-traditional students with alternative pathways and a delayed transition into higher education as well as prior work experience before entering higher education, it is plausible that they may encounter academic challenges. Moreover, since a significant number of them are working regularly alongside studying, and thus are more often following their study programme on a part-time basis, it is also plausible that scheduling concerns of lessons are posing difficulties for students, especially if these result in difficulties to reconcile work, family and childcare commitments. In view of the considerable share of students in the field of education that have children, difficulties related to childcare are, therefore, also reported as a frequent concern, namely by 14% of students. However, it is positive to note that despite these particular challenges witnessed by students enrolled in programmes in the field of education, they report considerably less often motivational difficulties (17%) compared to the total student population (24%). This, again, suggests good levels of self-efficacy and self-efficacy in behaviour management among teacher trainee students, which are important factors for resilience apart from students' personal life (Peixoto et al., 2018).

Satisfaction with Support. Students were asked to rate their satisfaction with various aspects related to student support from 1 (entirely sufficient) to 5 (not sufficient at all), as shown in Figure 4. They could also indicate that they do not need or want any support, represented by the value 6.

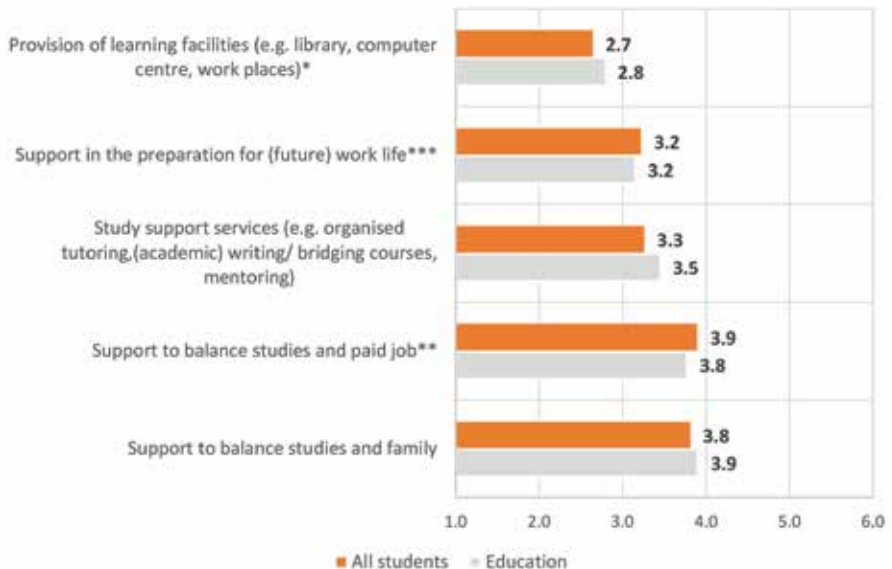
Overall, all students assessed the provision of learning facilities (mean rating score of 2.7) positively, took on a neutral stance regarding the support provided in the preparation for their (future) work life (mean rating score of 3.2), while they judged the support provided to balance studies and paid job (mean rating score of 3.9) or studies and family (mean rating score of 3.8) quite negatively.

Students in the field of education judge the provision of learning facilities slightly more moderately (mean rating score of 2.8) but assess the preparation for the (future) work life (mean rating scores of 3.2) significantly better than students in other fields of study. This may be linked to a clear career profile or

strong labour market demand associated with this field of study as outlined in the review of the literature on the subject. It may also be linked to a large share of students in the field of education already working alongside their studies in jobs that are closely related to their field. Thus, they may already be holding supporting roles in the education sector (Galea, 2020) and are seeking to obtain the necessary qualification to advance to a regular teaching post, or they may be seeking to advance their career in a headship position. When analysing the assessment of the support towards balancing studies and paid work, students enrolled in the field of education took on a middle position with a mean rating score of 3.8. However, overall, the mean rating scores show that students are not very satisfied with the support provided towards combining studies and work. This is in line with students’ assessment of their time budget, with 36% of all students and 45% of students in the field of education expressing the wish to spend more time on paid jobs.

Figure 4

Students’ Assessment of Various Aspects Related to their Satisfaction with Support (Students of Education Compared to All Students)

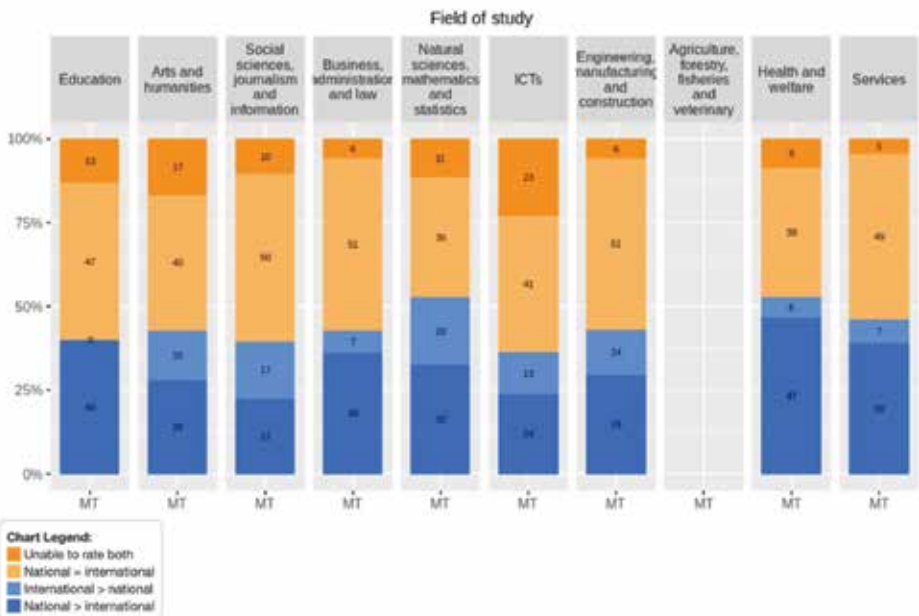


Note: 1 = Entirely sufficient; 5 = Not sufficient at all; 6=I do not need/want support;
 *Chi-sq. p-value =0.05; **Chi-sq. p-value= 0.001; ***Chi-sq. p-value= 0.008

Preparation for the Labour Market. Students were asked to rate their preparation for the national and the international labour market on a scale from 1 (very well) to 5 (very poorly). Students enrolled in the field of education assessed their preparation for the national labour market as (very) well and significantly better (57%) than the total student population (53%). The comparison of students' assessment of their preparation for the national and international labour market, as shown in Figure 5, reveals that students enrolled in the field of education feel significantly better prepared for the national labour market (40%) than students in other fields of study, with a Pearson Chi-square p-value of 0.000.

Figure 5

Students' Assessment of their Preparedness for the Labour Market (National vs. International) by Field of Study of Students



This may be due to programmes in this field preparing for a regulated profession, and thus providing a clear career progression pathway. Since students in the field of education also report that they work significantly more often during the whole lecture period and more often in jobs that are (very) closely related to their studies, the assessment of their preparedness for the labour market may be influenced both by an adequate preparation through their programme of studies as well as through relevant work experience. Moreover, as has already been argued above, students in the field of education may already be holding positions in the education sector and are either seeking to advance their career or obtain the required qualification to be able to obtain the teaching warrant and advance to a regular teaching post. Thus, the specific current government initiatives of recruiting educators (Galea, 2020) may influence the perception of teacher trainee students of their labour market opportunities, and therefore, the assessment of their labour market preparation.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

This research was based on aggregated data on students enrolled in programmes in the field of education based on the EUROSTUDENT VII dataset for Malta. Due to access restrictions to the microdata for this dataset, an analysis of subgroups of teacher trainee students, such as part-time or working students, was not possible. Additionally, undertaking multivariate regression analysis to understand the most influential factors for specific challenges encountered by teacher trainee students or their assessment of their studies or labour market preparation was not possible. This would have helped to evaluate the personal life and, consequently, the resilience of different subgroups of teacher trainee students. Further research with access to microdata could undertake a more fine-grained analysis and could aid in providing recommendations to improve the study and living conditions and resilience of teacher trainees in Malta. Moreover, qualitative approaches to data collection could provide more comprehensive insights into the profile of different groups of teacher trainee students and their assessment of their study and living conditions.

Conclusions

As has been shown based on the EUROSTUDENT VII national data, teacher trainee students in Malta have a particular profile distinct from students enrolled in other fields of study. They are significantly more often female, and are mature students with childcare responsibilities, entering through

non-traditional pathways with a delay of more than 2 years, with prior work experience, and are also frequently working alongside their studies in jobs that are closely related to their programme. This appears to be a recent development, based on a comparison to findings from EUROSTUDENT VI, which appears to be linked to the diversification of education providers and education provision, with enrolments in non-university programmes in the field of education increasing from 5% to 55% between 2016 and 2019 and part-time enrolments in teacher education programmes increasing from 27% to 51% over the same period (EUROSTUDENT VI and VII). It also appears to be linked to new government initiatives in recruitment of educators in response to labour market shortages in the education sector due to attrition (Galea, 2020) and increases and diversification in the total population and, consequently, in the student population in compulsory education (NSO, 2018, 2021, 2022). In view of this increased demand for and increased demands posed on teachers, this research sought to investigate the profile of teacher trainee students in Malta, challenges encountered by them as well as their perception of their studies and labour market preparation.

Key challenges emerging from the data are linked to the above average employment rate and family commitments of teacher trainee students in Malta. This includes their desire to reduce their overall time-budget dedicated to study-related activities by spending less time on taught studies while increasing time spent on paid jobs. It is also reflected in their below-average participation in study-related mobilities. Moreover, despite significantly higher shares of students working nearly full-time alongside their studies, teacher trainee students report significantly more often financial difficulties. This may be linked to positions held in supporting roles in the education sector that have low levels of remuneration, and larger financial commitments due to family and childcare responsibilities. Thus, in terms of students' personal life, considerable challenges are evident that may impact students' resilience (Peixoto et al., 2018). This particular profile of teacher trainee students also explains the negative mean rating scores regarding students' satisfaction with the support provided towards combining studies and work, which necessitates further efforts in this domain to improve the social and economic conditions of teacher trainee students in Malta to increase their resilience.

Teacher trainee students' non-traditional profile, as well as family and work commitments also seem to influence the assessment of their studies with

lower mean rating scores, indicating that they had less often clear intentions to study in higher education or to recommend their study programme to others. They also report difficulties with the standard of work in the study programme, organisational issues at the higher education institution and difficulties related to childcare. On the other hand, the data also indicated that students enrolled in the field of education report considerably lower levels of motivational difficulties and assess their relationship with their lecturers and fellow students generally positively, which is important since peer support and support from lecturers are important to foster self-efficacy and, in turn, resilience. Besides that, students enrolled in the field of education assess their preparation for the national labour market as (very) good and significantly better than that of the total student population. This might be influenced both by an adequate preparation through their programme of studies as well as through relevant work experience, given that teacher trainee students work more often in jobs closely related to their studies. Thus, they are likely holding positions in the education sector and undertaking their studies to advance their career or attain the required qualification to be able to obtain the teaching warrant and advance to a regular teaching post.

Notes on Contributors

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