

'ADDING SUBSTANCE TO FORMAT'

A Critical Perspective on the Matriculation Certificate Examination

by Michael A. Buhagiar

Introduction

Maltese external certification at secondary and post-secondary levels had relied almost entirely on examinations set by UK boards until the early 1990s. That is until it was decided to localise the examination system. The first concrete step in this direction was taken in 1989 with the setting up of the Matriculation and Secondary Certificate (MATSEC) Examinations Board under the umbrella of the University of Malta and with the participation of the Education Division and the Private Schools Association. Ventura and Murphy (1998) suggest that an important factor which contributed to the local indigenisation of examinations was the decision to improve the pre-university system. They (p. 48) speak of the Maltese desire "to replace the English GCE A-level system, which led to early narrow focusing on specific fields of study, with an International Baccalaureate-type system, without compromising the opportunity to achieve A-level standard in subjects required for further study." The resulting 18+ indigenised examination system became known as the Matriculation Certificate Examination. The Matriculation is a high-stakes external summative examination which serves a dual purpose: It provides Maltese students with access to university studies and offers them valid credentials on the job market. In this paper, apart from briefly describing the Examination's historical background, underlying philosophy and regulations, I explore some 'quality' aspects of the reform in order to tease out pertinent reflections and suggestions.

The Matriculation as a University Entrance Qualification

Academics at the University of Malta had been complaining for some time that students entering tertiary studies under the three A-level system were not being adequately prepared (Camilleri, 1995; Portelli, 1995; Wain, 1995; Zammit Mangion, 1995). The need to bridge and provide the necessary continuity between the secondary and the tertiary sectors was often mentioned. It was felt that students were entering university, albeit well qualified as far as academic qualifications were concerned, with a secondary school attitude (Vella *et al.*, 1993). As a precursor of the coming changes in the entry requirements, in October 1989 the University added Systems of Knowledge (SOK) to the then existing three A-levels prerequisite (Wain, 1991). Heywood and Serracino Inglott (1987, p.182) argue that SOK was introduced in "an attempt to broaden the sixth-form curriculum ... (and) ... to recreate the wholeness of the person." In more practical terms, SOK was to bridge the gap between those specialising in the Humanities and those specialising in the Sciences (Zammit Mangion, 1994). But the ultimate target was definitely not this 'cosmetic' change. The University was

after a much more 'radical' reform of its entry requirements.

In line with University expectations, the Nationalist Party (1987) had included in its 1987 electoral manifesto a promise that the feasibility of shifting university preparatory courses from the traditional English A-levels (including equivalent Advanced Matriculation examinations of the University of Malta) to the International Baccalaureate (IB) examinations would be studied (proposal f[iv], p. III[39]). Eventually an *ad hoc* commission was appointed in March 1992 by the Minister of Education to plan changes at the post-secondary level. The commission recommended that a Junior College under the guidance of the University would take over the preparation of students wishing to further their studies up to tertiary level. The Junior College was also meant to pilot test the introduction of a local adaptation of IB oriented curricula throughout the post-secondary, pre-university stratum. However the new Matriculation syllabi, including the innovative IM-level ones, were eventually introduced in 1995 in all local sixth forms without any pilot testing.

Under the new system students now study six subjects: two subjects at Advanced Matriculation level (AM), and four subjects at Intermediate Matriculation level (IM) (loosely defined as one-third of an AM-level). Systems of Knowledge, introduced prior to the launching of the Matriculation Certificate, has been incorporated in the new system as an obligatory subject at IM-level. As from October 1997 the Matriculation Certificate has basically become the entrance qualification for the University of Malta. Maltese students (unless they qualify by the maturity clause¹) can now only join first degree courses at University after passing the Matriculation Certificate Examination in addition to passes in Maltese, English and Mathematics at the 16+ Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) level. Students who do not intend to make it to university are allowed by MATSEC to sit for single AM-level subjects - very much in line with the replaced British system.

The Philosophy of the Matriculation Certificate

The introduction of the IB-style MATSEC Matriculation Certificate must be viewed mainly within the long lasting debate on the issue of breadth in the post-16 curriculum. The narrowness of the GCE A-level system has traditionally been perceived to guarantee a specialist knowledge base which lays the foundations for successful university studies. And nowadays, in spite of the increased awareness on the need to go for breadth as well as depth, the A-levels remain the standard against which all other post-16 achievements are measured (Pound, 1998). The GCE A-level examination has retained the reputation of the hallmark of academic excellence, and efforts aimed at

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¹At the discretion of the University, students who are at least 23 years of age and who can produce evidence that they may profit from tertiary education may also be admitted.

moving away from this culture often meet with resistance. Suffice to mention that, as yet, only a marginal number of English students follow courses leading to the Advanced Supplementary (AS)² examinations and the General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ) A-levels (Smithers, 1994). But while the post-16 'breadth debate' is far from concluded in the UK, in Malta, with the introduction of the Matriculation Certificate Examination, the scale tilted unequivocally in 1995 in favour of a wider post-16 curriculum.

Attempts had been made from as early as the 1970s to introduce locally the IB as a university entrance qualification, but contacts with the IB organisers (i.e. the International Baccalaureate Organisation) were not followed up (Zammit Mangion, 1992). In spite of such setbacks, local efforts to widen the sixth form curriculum continued unabated. For instance the post-secondary level National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) regulations (Legal Notice 56, 1991), written when the three A-level system was still *in vigore*, advocate a broad general education even at this level and recommend a delicate balance between the two opposing ends of broad-based education and specialisation. Although supposedly written to complement the then existing A-level system (supplemented by the Systems of Knowledge) so keen on specialisation, this NMC presents the case in favour of a system based on a broader 16+ curriculum which does not jeopardise future specialisation. This 'right' tension between curricular width and depth, so manifestly promoted in the 1991 NMC, was echoed in the arguments brought forward by MATSEC when promoting the new 18+ examination system. This is how a MATSEC promotional pamphlet (MATSEC, 1994b) justified the introduction of the IB-type certificate examination:

Malta's educational policy is based on the premise that individuals are more likely to develop into mature persons if their studies cover both the Humanities and the Sciences areas. ... Students will be able to specialise in one area or another, but without totally neglecting any of the basic fields of Knowledge. (p. 1)

The Matriculation Certificate has retained the 'qualifying' nature of the previous three A-levels university entry requirements system, even if this continuity has been questioned by some. When students' pass-rate on the second session (i.e., 1998) of the Certificate Examination decreased in comparison to the first session, there were accusations that the Matriculation Examination may have

²There are certain similarities worth keeping in mind between the Maltese IM-level and the UK GCE Advanced Supplementary (AS) level. The UK Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (1999) describes the AS level as: (i) half the content of an A-level, but at the same standard; (ii) available in linear or module courses over one or two years; and (iii) taken by students wishing to broaden their studies, or those who are not ready to tackle a full A-level. In addition QCA points out that the two AS subjects in place of an unspecified third A-level are acceptable for entry into most degree courses.

been manipulated in order to reduce the number of students eligible to university education (Schembri, 1998). But the MATSEC Analysis Facilitating Board³ has ruled that these accusations of selectivity were based on tenuous or inconsistent evidence. Its report (Zarb Adami, Debono & Sammut, 1999, p.28) indicates that both the number of students entering University and the total number of University students have continued to increase following the first Matriculation Examination in 1997.

The Matriculation Certificate Examination Regulations

The Matriculation Certificate Examination (for detailed Regulations see MATSEC, 1997, pp. v-vii) moves away from the notion of a single subject examination system. Instead students have to sit for all the six Certificate examinations in May (with re-sits in September) at the end of their two-year linear courses. The subjects of the Examination are subdivided into four groups (see Table 1) in addition to the compulsory SOK at IM-level. Apart from SOK, candidates are required to take five further subjects: one subject from each of groups 1, 2 and 3, and two other subjects chosen from any of these four groups. This structure ensures that all students study subjects from both the Humanities and the Science areas. Of these five subjects, two subjects must be at AM-level and the other three subjects at IM-level. No subject may be offered at both AM- and IM-levels.

Table 1: Subjects of the Matriculation Certificate Examination by groups

Group 1	Maltese, Arabic, English, French, German*, Greek, Italian, Latin, Russian*, Spanish*;
Group 2	Accounting, Economics, Geography, History, Marketing, Philosophy, Religious Knowledge, Sociology;
Group 3	Applied Mathematics (Mechanics), Biology, Chemistry, Environmental Science**, Physics, Pure Mathematics;
Group 4	Art, Computing, Engineering Drawing, Graphical Communication, Home Economics and Human Ecology*, Information Technology, Music;

* offered at AM-level only

** offered at IM-level only

To qualify for the Matriculation Certificate a candidate must pass the examinations taken in one session (which may include the supplementary session). A candidate qualifies for the Matriculation Certificate if he/she obtains a pass in at least one of the subjects offered from each of groups 1, 2 and 3 and in SOK, and a minimum of 44 grade points as indicated in Table 2. The Certificate is awarded with a single overall grade A, B or C (A - 80 to 100 grade points; B - 64 to 78 grade points; and C - 44 to 62 grade points) which is determined from the sum of the grade points in each subject of the examination. For the two Matriculation AM-level subjects the Certificate also indicates that a 'Pass with Distinction' or a 'Pass with Merit' has been awarded. The grade points allocation system is in such a way that the acquisition of the Certificate relies rather heavily on students' performance in the

³The ad hoc board was set up by the Minister of Education in October 1998 in order to analyse the MATSEC system and to recommend measures aimed at improving it.

two AM-level subjects. Consequently the IM-level subjects are of little consequence for certification purposes. Irrespective of the grades obtained in the May examination, students may re-sit a maximum of three subjects in the September supplementary session as follows: one subject at AM-level, one subject at IM-level and SOK. Candidates who fail to qualify for the Certificate are given single subject certificates for any passes obtained at AM-level, but this does not apply for the IM-level subjects.

(a) An Examination in Isolation

Linn (1993, p.1) sustains that "testing and assessment ... figure prominently in policymakers' efforts to reform education." He continues that this is based on the belief that assessments are critical agents of educational reform. A belief manifested locally when the University of Malta sat up the Matriculation Certificate Examination in an effort to improve the quality of its future students' preparation. The idea was a reformed sixth form education with strong assessment affinities. However I cannot but agree with Zammit Mangion (1994) who sustains that unless the Maltese educational system is changed from its very roots, the well-meaning, even if possibly too idealistic, aims and objectives of the new Matriculation regulations will remain mere ink. His argument is that if the University truly wants to improve the quality of its stu-

Table 2: The Matriculation Certificate grade points system

Grade	Advanced level	Intermediate level
Grade A (Distinction)*	30 grade points	10 grade points
Grade B (Merit)*	24 grade points	8 grade points
Grade C (Merit)*	18 grade points	6 grade points
Grade D	12 grade points	4 grade points
Grade E	6 grade points	2 grade points

* AM-level only

The Quality of the Reform

One can note an emerging national consensus that the MATSEC Examinations are here to stay. For instance Sultana (1998, p.144) concludes from his review of the MATSEC operations that "Malta has succeeded beyond the hopes and expectations of many in the country in setting up a promising and independent examination structure." However MATSEC operations are today still an object of local debate and heavy criticism, especially in the popular media. But this concerns more its day to day running and technicalities than its underlying philosophy. At the official level, the MATSEC Analysis Facilitating Board report (Zarb Adami *et al.*, 1999) practically gave the 'official' go ahead for the continuation of the present examination setup. While the Board members identified various shortcomings in MATSEC operations and offered a long list of recommendations, they sustained that presently no viable alternative (which also respected local educational goals) existed. This report, apart from consolidating MATSEC's status as a valid examination body, gives credence to local examinations as worthy measures of students' educational experiences. In particular, the Matriculation Certificate Examination has been confirmed, in spite of its short existence, as the key to local university studies.

It is within this scenario that I now pass on to examine some aspects of the Certificate which in my view impinge on the quality of the 18+ assessment reform. I am particularly concerned with the educational implications of the Certificate. I make no claim that my comments in this section are either exhaustive or comprehensive; indeed I can think of a number of Certificate areas which I have omitted - say the amount of subjects involved, the examination format and the lack of adequate certification at IM-level. All could do with some critical evaluation, but this is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I simply hope to marshal enough evidence to convince the reader that the Matriculation reform is far from complete. That is, if we want to translate the Matriculation Certificate Examination into a real assessment reform. I fear that so far we have achieved little more than to mimic an internationally trendy examination format.

students, more than simply reforming the examinations, it (and others, I must add) should also seek to improve the system in which these examinations operate: a system that, in his words (part two, p. 5), "tends to inhibit the child and train him to listen, obey, follow, learn and conform with set rules of thinking, feeling and behaving from the earliest stages, becoming even more oppressive and conformist (due largely to examination influence) as he/she mounts the scale." Zammit Mangion is basically asking for a more holistic approach to educational reform. He implies that by simply introducing differentiated subject levels (AM- and IM-levels) and by increasing (from four to six) and widening (both Arts and Sciences) the subject spread one cannot hope to improve the learning process. While good examination practices and the opportunities they present can encourage teachers to improve learning, by themselves, changes in examination procedures are likely to achieve little (Howson, 1993). Examination and assessment reforms need, at least, a complementary environment if they are to be effective - which appears not to be the case with the Matriculation Examination.

Nevertheless assessment reforms can serve as a catalyst for educational improvement. Suffice to mention that earmarked curricular innovations can only succeed if they are accompanied (and, indeed, led) by forms of assessment that reflect and support the aims of the innovation (Bell, Burkhardt & Swan, 1992). Back to the Matriculation innovation, wasn't it supposed to exert a positive influence on the sixth form learning process? Even though I am not aware of any published research that critically examines this, I still have serious reservations whether the Matriculation, at least in its present format, can actually achieve this. Regrettably the Matriculation reform does not incorporate any significant shift away from the complete reliance on summative external examinations. It certainly does not herald the local introduction of 'performance' or 'authentic' assessments, that is "assessment that supposedly either reflects 'good classroom practice' or actually assesses the learning that takes place during everyday classroom activity" (Morgan, 1996, p. 353). Indeed, this reform fails to translate its bid for a 'wider curriculum' to include 'wider assessment'. It is still an external measurement which

does not value teacher, school or other forms of assessment. This contrasts sharply with an early 1990s proposal (that however failed to materialise) to launch a British Baccalaureate which included important provisions aimed at widening the assessment process. Blackstone (1990, p. 5) reports that the reformed 16-19 education was planned to "move towards more internal in-course assessment, which will help motivate students and provide them with feedback, though some external assessment should be maintained to help secure even standards across the country." Maltese planners have thought otherwise: they have replaced the same traditional external high-stakes three A-levels system by an equally external high-stakes system. An assessment reform that, apart from the widening of the sixth form subject content, has format rather than substance implications.

The dangers of 'teaching to the test' (e.g., promoting a 'shallow' instead of a 'deep' learning approach) should help us reflect upon our own assessment policies. Failure to implement a more balanced assessment system designed to assess learning across all aspects of a subject and contexts of learning would result in the narrowing of students' learning to a range of basic skills learned in a superficial way (James & Gipps, 1998). But moving in this direction, as Linn (1995) notes, is not unproblematic. He points out that due to unresolved assessment-related technical issues (e.g., moderation of teachers' assessments) there is little evidence that performance-based assessment is feasible within a high-stakes assessment context. Could this 'knowledge' be holding MATSEC back from implementing a fairer and more inclusive Matriculation system? Or could this just be a convenient excuse for keeping the *status quo*? James and Gipps (1998), while conceding that the general public (who is more familiar with traditional tests) sometimes distrusts the newer forms of assessment, cite Daugherty (1997) who maintains that it is possible to train teachers in their use and to moderate their judgements in ways that would gain public confidence. I find this to be a reasonable starting point on which MATSEC could build. I am not suggesting that something which is still problematic abroad (granted that this equally applies to an imported 'success' story) would prove an unqualified local accomplishment. Instead my position is that we first have to agree upon the main characteristics of the local assessment system, and only then, through a concerted commitment aimed at analysing and planning ahead, may we start hoping to provide a valid response to local needs. Choosing a 'wait and see' attitude, as I suspect is presently happening in Malta, is unlikely to get us anywhere. What I find even more irritating is that when someone (e.g., Rizzo, 1997) tries to stir up the Matriculation debate (or some other assessment issue) at a more academic footing, no one appears interested enough to take up the challenge.

(b) An Examination in Need of Better Definition at IM-Level

Perhaps the greatest innovation of the new Matriculation system was the introduction of the local unpiloted 'experimentation' with the IM-level, a level simply defined as one-third of an AM-level. A MATSEC newsletter (MATSEC, 1994a, p. 1) lays down that "the Intermediate level will roughly require a third of the study time estimated as necessary to reach Advanced level after the attainment of the Secondary Education Certificate." But

so far the meaning of this 'one-third' has not been properly addressed by MATSEC. Does it refer to the amount or the level of the content, or both? On the contrary the GCE Advanced Supplementary (AS) level in the UK is clearly defined: half the content of an A-level, but at the same standard. Quite understandably the MATSEC analysis report (Zarb Adami *et al.*, 1999, p. 3) has included "the absence of a clear definition of the Intermediate level in the Matriculation Examination" as one of the main complaints it received from candidates, parents and teachers alike. Apparently this apprehension is also shared by some members of the MATSEC Board. The MATSEC report (Appendix 1) notes that "even some members of the MATSEC Board itself are realising that the equation '3 Intermediate levels = 1 Advanced level' is not only not clear but also possibly incorrect." Little wonder that the Matriculation IM-level has been earmarked as an area of special concern in this report.

I think that MATSEC, by failing to define the IM-level properly, may have unwittingly contributed towards creating a destabilising atmosphere around the Matriculation Certificate which may in turn lead people to question the validity of the studies undertaken. From the very beginning the possibility of lowering of standards and subsequent educational repercussions were mentioned. For instance Zammit Mangion (1994) queried the wisdom of producing what he called 'jacks-of-all-trades-but-masters-of-none.' When the new Matriculation Certificate was still on the planning table, he argued that:

Let us, by all means, have a better and wider University entry certificate but levels must be maintained. There are reasons to believe that the new Intermediate levels will be both very low and with only a mite of lasting educational value. (part two, p. 8)

The reference to the 'low levels' of the Intermediate, may disguise his fear (and probably that of many others) of losing out on the A-level system with its perceived benefits for a fruitful university education. Such a position has parallels in the UK where, according to Pound (1998, p. 167), "after the democratic levelling of the examination framework at 16+ in the 1980s through the merging of the GCE O-level and the CSE, it soon became clear that further proposed reforms which ostensibly threatened the academic standards could no longer be tolerated." Pound concludes that the British persisting notion that A-levels are a benchmark of academic excellence is actually impeding the solution of the problem of breadth in the 16-19 curriculum. However the IB, which is accepted by some 700 universities worldwide as a valid university entrance qualification, appears to have no such problems. The IB's breadth-depth balance, its academic rigour and its suitability as a preparation for university-level study are among the aspects of the programme which have contributed to its popularity and growth (Hayden & Wong, 1997).

Conclusion

The creation of a national examination system is an expression of self-determination, and an effort to gain more control over the curricula (Bray, 1998). And I strongly believe that MATSEC has helped Malta move in this direction; we now have an important additional means by which to chart our own educational destiny. Nevertheless

I find no room for complacency or unwarranted nationalistic feelings. The real success of localising the examination system relies on tangible results. Back to the core argument, it would indeed make sense to start exploring the extent to which the Matriculation system has resulted in better prepared university students. Ideally, researchers (not necessarily MATSEC people) would be continually gathering, analysing and interpreting pertinent data in an effort to get closer to answering this. But having said this, I am aware that MATSEC, on whose shoulders the responsibility presently lies, is severely understaffed, that most of its members lack proper training and that the University has been abandoned in its MATSEC venture by at least one of its two initial partners. For all this, and for the sheer amount of work involved to run an examination system that annually caters for thousands of Maltese students, the efforts of the MATSEC personnel and their collaborators should be much appreciated.

My analysis probably offers enough evidence to suggest that the Matriculation Certificate Examination has a long way to go before satisfying its *raison d'être*. Furthermore, I feel that it is only by identifying and seeing to problems that solutions can be sought. As long as we remain simply happy with numbers (e.g., 10,326 subject registrations for the Matriculation Certificate Examination in 1999, compared to 9,780 in 1998 and 7,854 in 1997), I suspect we would be missing the real meaning behind the Matriculation reform - a quality leap in sixth form education, not necessarily a numerical one. I actually find that the Matriculation's shortcomings identified here reflect deeper MATSEC problems. Suffice to mention that MATSEC has still no adequate internal provisions to monitor both the intended and unintended consequences of the system, even though, as suggested by Linn (1993), it is highly recommended to have them. Consequently MATSEC finds itself launching assessment reforms without having the ability to examine their real consequences.

I think that if MATSEC, as suggested by Briffa (1999), really wants to meet the needs of Maltese society through its examinations, it (or some other research body) can no longer neglect the ongoing evaluation dimension. Not only should we be ascertaining the quality of MATSEC reforms, but we should also vigil against interested people (say parents, teachers and students) who, according to Howson (1993), are very likely to attempt thwarting 'reforms by examination' to suit their own ends. However I fear that both suggestions are very unlikely to be taken up in the near future. Legally it is MATSEC's duty (if it should be so, is another matter!) to see to this. But unless its personnel, finances and resources are drastically beefed up, it honestly cannot do much better than at present. As is often the case, MATSEC's fortunes and consequently the success of our examination and assessment reforms lie mainly in the hands that control the purse. At present MATSEC could only hope to adhere to all its duties, including the much neglected research dimension, after considerable investments, of all sorts, have been made. Otherwise we continue running the risk of dishing out 'reforms' blindfolded.

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