

The Setting Up of the University of Malta Junior College: Origins, Motives and Polemics

Michael A. Buhagiar

michael.buhagiar@um.edu.mt

Michael A. Buhagiar teaches Pure Mathematics at the University of Malta Junior College, which he joined when it was set up in 1995. He holds B.Ed.(Hons.) and M.Ed. degrees from the University of Malta, and is currently a doctoral candidate at the School of Education, University of Nottingham (UK). His present research interests lie mainly in the field of educational assessment with particular reference to the mathematics classroom.

Abstract:

The Junior College of the University of Malta is the foremost sixth form institution on the Island. Specifically set up in 1995 to initiate students upon completion of their secondary schooling in methods of study appropriate to tertiary education, the College was born out of a generally recognised need to reform the local pre-university sector. However, although most people agreed on the existence of a general malaise suffocating this sector, not everyone concurred that a sixth form college administered by the University would provide the necessary cure. The present paper, which focuses primarily on the setting up of the College, sets out to trace its short yet colourful story. Right from its inception to the present days, the College's existence has been shrouded in much bickering and polemics. Now is probably the time to take a less emotive look at these past and present events, and to plan ahead.

The Junior College Controversy

In October 1995 the University of Malta, with the opening of its Junior College, added pre-university studies to its responsibilities.¹ The Junior College 'saga', in a Maltese scenario that is not particularly keen on debating educational issues, stands out and remains one of the more hotly debated recent educational reforms in Malta (Zammit Mangion, 1995). Some (e.g., Muscat, 1995) have opined that the real motives behind the setting up of the Junior College know of various hidden and complicated interests.

¹ About 55% of Maltese school leavers continue full-time post-secondary studies (Ministry of Education, 2001). This level consists of roughly two main sectors: the more popular academic sector (comprising students completing their secondary education or following pre-university studies) and the vocational sector (students studying for work related qualifications in technical and trade areas).

Suffice to mention that although there was no public outcry at the time when Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, the then Nationalist Minister of Education, announced in 1992 the intention to start a Junior College as part of the University (Camilleri, 1995b; Wain, 1995), the Minister admitted later on that this proposal had met with obstacles from various contradictory sources (see Parliamentary Question 12416, 1993).

But it was only after the University issued a call for applications to fill teaching posts at the Junior College in May 1995 that the controversy picked up the necessary momentum that would carry it for the coming months. Teachers at Malta's main state sixth form institution organised an Action Committee to fight the implementation, and their students took to the streets protesting to safeguard their interests.² The teachers' resistance culminated in a sit-in strike that lasted for several weeks. In the ensuing weeks and months, the pros and cons of setting up the Junior College within the University structures and the 'intrigues' surrounding the story featured prominently in the local media. It is against this background that the present paper tries to delineate the origins, the motives and the ensuing polemics, as well as the eventual setting up, of this widely and hotly debated pre-university college.

The Origins of the Junior College

The present Junior College as a pre-tertiary institution has its origins in the Nationalist Party's electoral manifesto for the 1987 General Elections that the party eventually won (see Nationalist Party, 1987). The party had proposed that a distinction would be made between post-secondary schools specifically preparing students for university studies and those, also of an academic nature, preparing students for immediate employment by completing their secondary education (proposal f[ii], p. III[38]). These Nationalist policies, which could have been a reaction to the general malaise experienced by the University of Malta with regards to the quality of its incoming students, were to shift eventually the bulk of the local post-16 education from the post-secondary to the pre-university level. But not everyone heralded this subtle shift

² Some (e.g., the then University Rector [see Portelli, 1995]) have questioned however whose interests the protesting students had been actually protecting. In fact, a number of teachers opposing the opening of the College were accused of manipulating their students in order to protect their positions. The teachers denied these allegations (see Degiorgio, 1995).

in emphasis. For instance, Zammit Mangion (1995) made the case for keeping all post-16 studies firmly within the realm of secondary education. His arguments were based on a view of education that considers post-16 courses as the completion of a cycle. On the contrary, Wain (1995) argued that, as the vast majority of Maltese students actually change school on entering post-16 courses, the students' only real link with their secondary education remains the notorious teaching mode based on 'reproduction techniques' that, in spite of various condemnations (e.g., Bartolo, 1997; Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 1995c), continues to characterise the local system.

The setting up of the Junior College was also widely interwoven with the reforms in the University's entrance examination system.³ There have even been suggestions that one of the main reasons behind the new college was the introduction of the Matriculation Certificate Examination, the new local 18+ certification system of the University of Malta (see Muscat, 1994). And the opening of the Junior College was planned to coincide with the first students to start post-16 studies under the new IB type examination system (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 1995b). The Nationalist Party's 1987 electoral manifesto had included a promise that the feasibility of shifting university preparatory courses from the traditional English A-Level examinations (including the equivalent Advanced Matriculation examinations of the University of Malta) to the International Baccalaureate examinations would be studied (proposal f[iv], p. III[39]). Consequently, when the Minister of Education appointed an *ad hoc* commission in March 1992 to plan changes at the post-secondary level, the commission was briefed to give due consideration to the planned changes in the university entrance examinations from the English to a European based system (Falzon, 1995c). The ensuing report of Commission on Post-Secondary, Pre-

³ As from October 1997, Maltese students enrol for undergraduate courses at the University of Malta after passing the Matriculation Certificate Examination. The Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate Examinations Board (MATSEC) of the same University offers this Certificate. This local adaptation of the International Baccalaureate (IB) system has replaced the traditional English three A-Levels system in an effort to widen the sixth form curriculum. Under the new system students study six subjects: two subjects at Advanced Level, and four subjects at Intermediate Level (loosely defined as one-third of an Advanced Level). The Certificate is based on the premise that students may develop better into mature persons if their studies include both the Humanities and the Science areas (Briffa, 1997).

University Institutional Adaptations (Ministry of Education, 1992)⁴ remained unpublished, but it was leaked out to the press by the Labour opposition spokesperson on education (see Malta Labour Party, 1992). The report had 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 the local adaptation of the IB-oriented curricula throughout the post-secondary, pre-university stratum. Notwithstanding this, the new curricula were introduced eventually in 1995 without any pilot testing.

The seeds in the 1987 Nationalist electoral manifesto also managed to germinate and grow thanks to interested parties, primarily the teachers based at the Gian Frangisk Abela Upper Lyceum. Many teachers at the G. F. Abela, Malta's largest University feeder at the time⁵, recognised in these proposals an opportunity to further their agenda. These sixth form teachers had long been trying to upgrade their status and to give the post-secondary sector a status of its own, distinct from the secondary sector (Muscat, 1994; Degiorgio, 1995; Rizzo, 1995). However, their hopes, which had been newly livened by the Nationalist policies, were dashed when the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) reached a new agreement with the government in 1989 that made no provisions for post-secondary institutions (see *Agreement*, 1989). The MUT remained reluctant to accede to the wishes of teachers in the post-secondary sector, as this would have worked against its avowed principle of uniformity in teacher grades (Rizzo, 1995). Feeling let down by this new Government-MUT agreement, the teachers at G. F. Abela decided to form their house union, the New Lyceum Teachers Union (NLTU).⁶ Frank Boffa (1994), the NLTU secretary, claimed that their union was never against making the necessary changes at the G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum so that it may be transformed into a pre-university college within the structures of the Education Division. Claiming that the 1989 Government-MUT agreement blocked developments along this line, Boffa argued that the NLTU consequently had to knock

⁴ This report was later also brought up for 'discussion' at the Council for Education (but Darmanin [1995] expressed doubts about how thoroughly discussed it was). The Council, a wide-ranging consultative body, agreed to the creation of the Junior College as part of a general overhaul of the entire state post-secondary sector.

⁵ Muscat (1994) referred to an unpublished tracer study conducted by the Guidance Section of the G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum which found that most of its students made it to university, and that the G. F. Abela, apart from being the largest state sixth form institution, was also the main university feeder.

⁶ The state 'Upper Lyceums' (or sixth forms) were previously called 'New Lyceums'.

on other more responsive doors in order to ensure that the Nationalist government would fulfil its electoral promise. This was how the University of Malta, at least officially, began to play an important role in the establishment of the new college.

The Involvement of the University of Malta

In reality, the University of Malta was never actually a disinterested spectator in the whole matter. It had been complaining for some time that students entering tertiary studies were not being adequately prepared (see Camilleri, 1995b; Portelli, 1995; Wain, 1995; Zammit Mangion, 1995).⁷ But its well-publicised lamentations failed to impress everyone. For instance, some teachers at the G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum felt that if, as the University was claiming, teaching at their school was not providing adequate university preparation, it was rather the fault of the then 18+ examination system of the same University that allowed students to sit for their examinations even during the first year (Action Committee, 1995b). These teachers argued that their school was just following a system for which it could not be held responsible. Joseph Muscat (1995), the last Head Teacher of the G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum before its take-over by the University, intervened on several occasions during the Junior College debate in an effort to save 'his' school from extinction. In particular, he lashed out at people who made it sound as if the Junior College was necessary because the students were then not being adequately prepared for university. Muscat defended staunchly the pre-College system and teachers, and argued that should the new institution prove successful, something that he very much doubted, it would be mainly thanks to the fact that it was usurping lock, stock and barrel the existing Upper Lyceum structures and staff. On the other hand, Borg (1995b) contended that the high level reached by recent University dissertations and the ever increasing number of Maltese students who were successfully continuing with their post-graduate studies in foreign institutions indicated that local tertiary standards had actually improved over the last years. The Junior College opponents did however concede to varying degrees that the then existing pre-university system needed a reform (see Andrews 1995a; Action

⁷ Wain (1991) maintained that the Systems of Knowledge (now a compulsory Intermediate Level subject in the new Matriculation system) was introduced in 1989 as a precursor of the 1995 examination reform precisely because "the University felt that the [then] current secondary schooling and A-Level exams were bad or insufficient preparation" (p. 69).

Committee, 1995a; Malta Labour Party, 1995). But they all concurred that the University College was not the solution.

The present Junior College is not the first pre-tertiary institution governed by the University of Malta. The University had established another Junior College in the late 1960s, which it subsequently lost in the early 1970s when the government amalgamated the University Junior College and all sixth form studies in state secondary schools into a Higher Secondary School under the umbrella of the Department of Education. Given this precedent, the University may also have been tempted to settle some old scores. Again, the report (see Ministry of Education, 1992) that recommended the re-establishment of the University Junior College was presided over by Peter Serracino Inglott, the then Rector of the University. In these circumstances, the Rector's endorsement could also have been interpreted as a sign of willingness on the University's part to regain substantial control over pre-university studies. In fact, there were some insinuations (e.g., Zammit Mangion, 1995) that the University had actually exercised pressure to have the Junior College under its control. But the University denied all allegations that the idea of linking the Junior College to the University emanated from within itself. It claimed instead that it had just been reasonable enough to accept the good offer once it was made (see Camilleri, 1995a; Portelli, 1995). Kenneth Wain (1995), the person entrusted by the Minister of Education in 1993 to oversee the setting up of the Junior College, and Frank Boffa (1994), the NLTU secretary, corroborated the University's denial. Both sustained that it was actually the NLTU that had proposed the setting up of the College to the University.

The debate that preceded the setting up of the Junior College frequently focused on the type of education such an institution should provide. The need to bridge and provide the necessary continuity between the secondary and the tertiary sectors of education 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, 1993, p. 18). The new college was earmarked in fact to tackle such deficiencies. It was to provide its students with the best available education and preparation for university (Wain, 1995). Serracino Inglott opined that post-secondary students wanting to further their studies up to university level need a

different kind of education from that meant for those who plan to enter immediately into the working world, and suggested that the former students stand to gain if they are prepared in an institution which has the best links with the University (see Portelli, 1995). Insisting that the main role of such an institution would be to ensure a planned and gradual transition between school and university, Serracino Inglott complained that this did not exist under the pre-Junior College system. Wain (1995) argued that once all interested parties (with the exception of the MUT⁸) had consented to the idea of having a special institution to prepare students for university it would logically follow that “the University is best placed to determine that institution’s programme and to monitor it” (p. 62). But, paradoxically, it was the University’s involvement in the running of the Junior College that brought with it the harshest criticisms.⁹

Mounting Opposition to the University’s Involvement

Rather surprisingly, the most vehement attacks against the University’s involvement came from the bulk of the teachers at the G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum. Indeed, one of the most ironic features that characterises the Junior College story is that many of the sixth form teachers who initially had supported the idea of a pre-university institution eventually ended up resisting its implementation. Linking the proposed institution with the University had serious implications for most of them. Not only were many to suffer financial losses and worse working conditions¹⁰, but also, as the teaching complement of the proposed Junior College was planned to be drastically smaller than that of the G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum¹¹, many teachers had feared that they would not

⁸ Ironically, the MUT had in 1981 proposed to political parties the amalgamation of the then state sixth form college with the University of Malta under the name of Junior College (see Malta Union of Teachers, 1981).

⁹ Years later, a White Paper (see Forum for a Better Economy, 1998) not only attributed success to the University’s Junior College venture, but also proposed that all post-16 education should fall under the responsibility of the University. In this White Paper, the University’s future role was perceived as a network of Faculties, Colleges and specialised schools covering all facets of adult education.

¹⁰ Degiorgio (1995) calculated that 55% of the G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum teachers, especially those employed before 1979, would be seriously affected by joining the University College. He sustained further that 73% of them, given the choice, would have definitely preferred to continue teaching in the state sixth form college. Degiorgio argued that by joining the University their basic salary would not improve, and their actual losses would include: (i) the freezing of pension sum until retirement, (ii) less sick leave entitlement, (iii) privation of various teaching allowances, (iv) longer working hours, (v) shorter vacation leave, and (vi) blocked promotion prospects within the Education Division.

¹¹ However, Boffa (1999) maintained that when the NLTU had started its work on the Junior College project, the teachers involved then were considerably less than when the G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum

continue teaching at the post-secondary level (Borg, 1995a; Degiorgio, 1995). This uncertainty brought considerable human suffering to all involved (Andrews, 1995a). At one point, a small group of sixth form teachers even approached the Minister of Education in their personal capacity to express their preoccupation (see Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 1995a). Concerns regarding the conditions of work of the future College teachers were also expressed by the Malta Union of Teachers (1995c). But, following submissions to the Minister of Education, the MUT (1995b) announced later that its demands on work conditions had been accepted.¹² The Minister of Education subsequently brandished this exercise as proof of his commitment to consultation on the matter (see Falzon, 1995b).

Meanwhile, the relations between the majority of the G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum teachers and their house union leaders had gradually become distant and bitter. The teachers eventually formed an Action Committee to safeguard their interests, and publicly accused the leaders of their house union of working behind their backs in order to promote their personal interests (see Action Committee, 1995a).¹³ Claiming lack of transparency, the G. F. Abela teachers who were distant from the NLTU nucleus denounced the appointment of prominent house union members, some of whom had been involved in the discussions with the Minister of Education, at key positions under the new set up, while others had not even been considered (see The Editor, 1995b). In their efforts to impede the realisation of the proposed college, a good number of G. F. Abela teachers, apart from organising a sit-in strike, pleaded to the Prime Minister and waged legal battles.¹⁴ These teachers' fight was not directed at

was eventually replaced by the College in 1995. He added that the teacher numbers at G. F. Abela had been 'inflated' in the last two years before the College was established.

¹² The union managed to obtain assurances that the chosen candidates who had been in government employment prior to 1979 would have their pension frozen, and that those, previously in government service, who would not be eventually offered permanent employment by the University following their one year probation period would be entitled to go back to their former job.

¹³ Frank Boffa, the NLTU secretary who had by then resigned his union post, forcefully denied these accusations (see Boffa, 1995). He argued that his presence on the Technical Board set up by the University and the Education Division to oversee the creation of the College did not amount to a betrayal of his colleagues. And he claimed that the resulting document of this Board did not harm any sector of the teaching profession in any way.

¹⁴ The Action Committee asked the Prime Minister by means of a letter on 5 June 1995 to intervene personally in order to postpone the opening of the Junior College. Again, claiming misrepresentation, the Committee filed on 12 June 1995 a judicial protest in the First Hall of the Civil Court to declare null and void an alleged agreement signed with the government by the Secretary of their house union on their behalf. The Minister of Education, who had earlier denied the existence of such an agreement, reiterated that as the setting up of the College had implications vis-à-vis the teachers' working conditions, it was the main teachers' union (i.e., MUT) that had been consulted (see Falzon, 1995b).

the College ideals *per se* (Andrews, 1995a). Instead, the Action Committee had channelled its protests against what it perceived as lack of consultation and inadequate planning. The teachers' demands included postponing the opening of the proposed college until a comprehensive analysis of the whole post-16 sector had been undertaken.

The relations between the G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum teachers and the Minister of Education had turned sour in the meantime. The Minister did not mince words when he publicly accused the dissenting teachers that their resistance to change emanated from their fear of losing out on acquired privileges and not from educational considerations (see Falzon, 1995c). On its part, the Action Committee (1995b), echoing arguments previously raised by Zammit Mangion (1995), alleged that should the proposed shift from the Education Division to University occur, the Minister would be then violating the 1988 Education Act by reneging his legal responsibility over a substantial part of the post-secondary sector. Wain (1995) opined however that these allegations would not hold tight in a court of law, as the Education Act (Ministry of Education, 1988) still gives the Minister substantial control over the University. The University, even though an autonomous institution with a legal character of its own, is to all intents and purposes a state institution. Almost half of the Council members, the University's highest governing body, are directly appointed by the government and the University is almost completely supported from public funds through annual budgets passed by parliament.

Other attacks on the proposed amalgamation between the pre-university institution and the University came from within the Labour opposition, Alternattiva Demokratika, leading commentators on education, the MUT, the G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum students, and prominent academics at the University. While a Labour Party working document (see Vella, 1993, p. 17) recommended a cautious 'wait and see' attitude vis-à-vis the Junior College, prominent party exponents, including party leader Alfred Sant (see Sant, 1995) and party spokesperson on education Evarist Bartolo (see Malta Labour Party, 1995), argued that the University was already too burdened with its own problems to have another predicament put on its shoulders. As with the G. F. Abela teachers, rather than the actual aims behind the setting up of the College, it was the direct link with the University that invariably came under attack.

Referring to the proposed College ideals of developing critical and independent thought, and problem solving and communication techniques in students, Bartolo opined that these should indeed characterise the whole educational system. The Malta Labour Party (1995), Alternattiva Demokratika (1995) and others (e.g., Muscat, 1994; Zammit Mangion, 1995) concurred that the intended aims of the Junior College could be reached without attaching the institution to the University. But Wain (1995), sneering at such comments, queried why, if this were the case, had the problem, known and acknowledged by all, never been addressed previously. Wain accused these individuals, especially those whom he claimed had long been indifferent to the University's complaints, that they were opposing the proposed college simply because they regretted seeing matters slipping out of the Education Division's sphere of influence. The University, in his view, instead was tackling the problem by taking matters in its own hands.

The MUT was in a rather peculiar position throughout the Junior College debate. To start with, it had been a splinter group from within the union itself (i.e., the NLTU founding members) that had set the ball rolling. But then, many of the sixth form teachers who later protested against the setting up of the College had previously resigned from the MUT to join their new house union in a bid to create such an institution. This development led Rizzo (1995) to suggest, quite understandably, that the MUT could have been possibly pleased with the turn of events. But, at the same time, the MUT was bound by a carried motion presented by these protesting teachers (some of whom had in the meantime returned within the union's fold) during its 1995 Annual General Conference to take up their case with the Minister of Education (see Malta Union of Teachers, 1995a). Despite criticisms that the union had kept a very low profile throughout the whole story (e.g., Wain, 1995), unpublished union documentation instead attests to the active role played by the MUT.¹⁵ The MUT had considered from the onset the opening of the University College as a 'mistake', as it was adamantly against the University's involvement in pre-university studies. The union had feared the consequences of creating a 'mini-university'. The MUT argued that obliging young students, including those who would not be entering university, to follow at post-secondary level a university based teaching system could lead to

¹⁵ This emerged when I met Joseph DeGiovanni, the MUT General Secretary, in February 1998 to discuss the union's role throughout the Junior College story.

negative psychological effects on the students. Another bone of contention in the union's frequent representations with the Ministry of Education and the University authorities was the lack of 'real consultation' over the planned reform. The MUT, besides alleging that it was being systematically excluded from all discussions, complained that the reform talks only focused on the future of the G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum, thus excluding the rest of the local post-16 institutions. This went contrary to the reform path indicated by the union. For the MUT believed in a holistic reform of the post-secondary sector based on consultations and negotiations with all interested parties. And the union augured that, once the needs of the various post-16 institutions would have been identified, *ad hoc* schools and colleges should be established under one structure for all the students finishing their secondary studies.

The then G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum first year students also felt threatened by the planned University take-over of their institution. Their objections, some of which were more directed against the forthcoming changes in the 18+ certification system (i.e., the introduction of the Matriculation Certificate Examination) than the actual setting up of the Junior College, included the eventual increase in the number of students in class as a direct consequence of linking post-secondary studies to tertiary studies (see Upper Lyceum Students Council, 1995a). The students managed to put up a united front. And in a bid to safeguard their interests, they not only refused to sit down for their annual examinations, but also took to the streets in protest. The Minister of Education, Michael Falzon, finally succeeded to reassure these students that the new College would in no way affect their studies. Eventually, the Minister and the students struck a deal that, other than securing the right for first year students to continue their second year on the College premises, also guaranteed them automatic promotion on the basis of their assessments throughout the year. But this 'agreement' did not deter the students from openly continuing to support their teachers' resistance against the opening of the Junior College (see Upper Lyceum Students Council, 1995b).

The University's efforts to make the Junior College its 'reception hall' were also attacked from within its ranks. For instance, Lauri and Fiorini (1995), two University academics, argued that since the University's resources were already stretched to the limit, it could not possibly guarantee to fulfil the declared aims of the Junior

College.¹⁶ And Darmanin (1995), another lecturer, questioned the sense of increasing further the budget of an institution (i.e., the University) that was already benefiting disproportionately from the education budget at the expense of other sectors in greater need. These public outbursts of dissent did not pass unnoticed. The University reiterated that the Junior College was to have its own separate budget, over and above the usual University budget (see Camilleri, 1995b). Apparently, while it was certainly to become an added administrative responsibility to the University, the College was never planned to burden financially the mother institution.¹⁷ The University, possibly in an effort to play down the effects of internal criticisms, publicly chided the members of staff contrary to its pre-tertiary policies (see Camilleri, 1995a). These were paraded as being most probably the same ones who had previously complained about the questionable quality of the incoming students.

Educational Issues Related to the Setting Up of the Junior College

The Junior College was to be part of a new rationalisation of the whole post-secondary sector (Camilleri, 1995b). Suffice to mention that the Council of Education, apart from the Junior College, had suggested also the establishment of two other post-secondary institutions: a college for the technical and vocational subjects and a college meant for students who intend to complete their secondary education before starting work.¹⁸ Notwithstanding these suggestions, the Junior College was to become

¹⁶ Years later, Boffa (1999) claimed that the College had not grown as envisaged partly because of lack of funds and partly because the College opponents were still doing all they could to hinder its growth. He even expressed fears that these 'actions' may eventually lead the College to a halt. Eventually, it has been the College academic staff that ended up paying for the financial limitations referred to by Lauri and Fiorini. College lecturers, in comparison to their colleagues on the main University campus, operate in hugely inferior working-place conditions, have inferior academic work resources (and there were years when they were getting none), lack adequate support staff, and generally feel towards the bottom end of the University's priority list. The College academic staff elected an Action Committee in January 1999 to promote their cause, and all signed a Memorandum (see Junior College Academic Staff, 1999) that explicitly accused the University authorities of discriminatory practices. The MUT, following a motion (see Malta Union of Teachers, 1997) approved during its 1997 Annual General Conference, has since been involved in discussions with the University to rectify this situation. The union feels that the College staff should not be made to suffer the consequences of what it considers as 'past wrong decisions'.

¹⁷ But according to Godfrey Muscat, the present Junior College Principal, the University is constrained to dip deep into its pockets to help the Junior College survive, as the allocated College annual budget does not even cover the salaries (see Wood, 2002).

¹⁸ Since then, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) has started operating in September 2001.

a reality when the plans for the other two colleges were still on the drawing boards. This may explain why some (e.g., Action Committee, 1995b; Alternattiva Demokratika, 1995; Malta Labour Party, 1995) forwarded accusations that the post-secondary sector was getting a piecemeal treatment. Even the newly selected College administration was criticised heavily. The Action Committee, whilst seriously objecting to some of the senior appointments that were made, accused the new College administration of lacking the necessary experience. But this was just the tip of the iceberg. The months preceding the opening of the College were characterised by various polemics concerning educational issues related to the pre-university level. The opposing camps brought forward strong arguments to back their respective positions. But while the ensuing ‘debate’ could have proved particularly fruitful at the planning stage, its late timing and a number of ‘suspect’ interventions deflated this dimension. The debate focused mainly on adequate teaching methods, the qualifications of the College lecturers, the new local 18+ examinations, and access to University.

Of all the educational issues raised during the College debate, none was more hotly discussed or more frequently on the agenda than the forthcoming changes in the teaching methods. This could hardly have surprised anyone, as this particular matter specifically concerned the *raison d’être* for the setting up of the College. According to the Minister of Education, the aims of the Junior College were to be the development of the students’ personality and the introduction of a system by which students would start familiarising themselves with methods of study more consonant with university education (see Falzon, 1995c). And Camilleri (1995b), speaking on behalf of the University, sustained that the overriding idea was to “create the type of teaching and pedagogical practices that will bridge the chasm between the modes of teaching and learning that characterise secondary schooling and those that characterise tertiary education” (p. 6). Camilleri stressed that the ‘new’ teaching modes would be mixed: Straightforward lectures involving relatively large groups were to be balanced by small group teaching methods such as seminars, discussions, workshops, tutorials, practicals, and personal contact hours. But these very features, which had been promoted as the College’s stronger assets, fell prey to the harshest attacks.¹⁹

¹⁹ Both the Minister of Education and the University stressed the importance of linking the College directly to the University. In particular, they pushed forward the idea that College students would have the opportunity to visit and to make full use of the University resources. The critics were however less

What practically all of the College opponents objected more strongly to concerned the idea of having 16-year-olds, straight from the 'sheltered' secondary schools, attend large group lectures. They also pointed out that the 'recuperating' small group teaching methods had already existed under the previous system. Lauri and Fiorini (1995), in their refutation to the claim that the College would improve the quality of pre-university teaching, maintained that the only truth about the College was that fewer teachers were going to teach larger classes – something that, according to them, sounded more like preparing students for the worst. On similar lines, Degiorgio (1995) opined that the stark reality behind the fine rhetoric surrounding the new teaching methods was that students were to be grouped in large numbers. He cynically dubbed the planned reform as a vaccination against the future university shock awaiting the students. Darmanin (1995) also questioned the logic behind the forthcoming changes. She argued that it would have made more sense to address the problems of the University than to hope to minimise them but preparing the students beforehand for the 'traumatic' university experience. Even Andrews (1995a) chose to shift the focus of his arguments from the post-secondary to the University reality. Andrews intimated that, instead of the much-maligned pre-university preparation, the roots of the University woes could actually be traced back to its own teaching methods. He concluded that, once this is the case, it would be complete madness to introduce the same methods at pre-university level.

Regardless of the appropriateness of large group teaching at tertiary level, serious doubts were consistently expressed about the wisdom of introducing them at post-16 level. At one point, Andrews (1995a) even insinuated that the proponents' eagerness on university methods was just an excuse to remove the '25 students per class limit'²⁰ that, in his opinion, had in the past guaranteed quality and interaction between teachers and students. The University however refuted such arguments: The teachers who spoke in favour of retaining this limit were accused of either having a 'secondary

than thrilled by this. They pointed out that, in any case, students could, against a nominal fee, avail themselves of these facilities prior to the setting up of the College. It was also felt that the University's limited resources had already been under heavy strain even before the planned influx of the College students (Malta Labour Party, 1995).

²⁰ A Government-MUT agreement (see *Agreement*, 1994) limits the maximum number of students at sixth form level to 25 per class. But the Minister of Education complained that the 'small classes' at the Upper Lyceum had led to waste of human resources and various other abuses (see Falzon, 1995c).

mentality,' or of having ulterior motives (see Camilleri, 1995a). Another aggravating point was that these 'university' teaching methods were going to be introduced at this level without first examining their possible effects (Action Committee, 1995b). Various sources, such as *Alternattiva Demokratika* (1995), Andrews (1995a) and the Malta Labour Party (1995), stressed that given their young age and limited experiences, sixth form students should not be put on the same scales as university students. They all pleaded for these differences to be respected. These dissenting voices agreed that sixth form students would be passing through a critical period in their development, and would therefore need all the individual attention they could get. Their argument was that it is not unusual for post-secondary students, just out from the more sheltered secondary schools, to feel lost and disoriented whilst making the leap between secondary and post-secondary education. Consequently, to assemble these students into large groups would only render their new environment more impersonal and thus less sensitive to their needs. Another concern raised in the debate focused on the desire of having the necessary levels of interaction and discussion in class. It was argued that large student groupings would work against this. Not only would lectures become a one-way process (Borg, 1995b), but the University's often-criticised methods (e.g., passively taking notes during lectures, only to reproduce them later on) would also be reproduced at a lower level (Malta Labour Party, 1995).

Another point discussed during the College debate was the 'qualifications' of the lecturers to be engaged at the College. The issue was whether College lecturers, apart from content expertise, should also have pedagogical training. The public call for applications for academic posts at the Junior College followed the normal University procedures. This meant that applicants were not requested to have any pedagogical training. Many, amongst whom the MUT (see The Editor, 1995a) and the Action Committee (1995b), objected to the idea of having 16-year-olds taught by persons without any teacher training whatsoever. The Action Committee also remarked that the situation seemed further aggravated by the fact that many experienced sixth form teachers would not be applying for the College jobs as the conditions offered were not favourable to them. The Ministry of Education and Human Resources (1995b) and the University (see Portelli, 1995) tried to play down this aspect. Both argued that it was very unlikely that people who did not qualify for the teacher's warrant would find

their way to the College.²¹ The MUT was somewhat appeased by these assurances, particularly those forthcoming from the education ministry (see Malta Union of Teachers, 1995b).²²

Muscat (1995) sustained that the G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum had always managed in its 22-year-old history to adapt itself successfully to the changing entry requirements of the University. He could simply not understand why it was necessary to establish a new college when the Upper Lyceum could have met the changed circumstances (i.e., the introduction of the new IB type examination system) with some minor adjustments. Andrews (1995b), arguing from a different perspective, practically came to the same conclusion. Andrews warned that introducing two innovations (i.e., the Junior College and the Matriculation Certificate Examination) concurrently complicated matters unnecessarily. The coming of the Matriculation Certificate meant that most of the A-Level syllabi had to be restructured, and new untried ones had to be drawn for the Intermediate Level subjects. Above all this, not everyone had accepted the new examination system with open arms. For instance, the Action Committee (1995a) warned that the subsequent increase in the number of subjects studied by the students might lead to further fear, stress and private tuition. And Borg (1995b) opined that should the students have more subjects to study, contrary to the aims of the new College, they would have even less time for research activities. Years later, a survey among the College students revealed that they overwhelmingly preferred the old three A-Levels system to the new one.²³ The College administrators, not surprisingly, saw fit at one point to qualify the link between the College and the new examination system. They stressed that the College did not create the new IB type examination system, but had only adopted it (see Bonello, 1997).

Prior to its opening, the Minister of Education had insisted that the Junior College would not be a glorified sixth form for the elite, enjoying exclusive access to

²¹ But even the teacher's warrant does not guarantee pedagogical training. The 1988 Education Act (Ministry of Education, 1988) provides for the warrant to be granted also to all holders of recognised Masters or higher degrees.

²² However, while the initial selection of 1995 by and large followed this criterion, many members of staff were subsequently enlisted without qualifying for the warrant.

²³ A survey conducted by the College students' body revealed that over 75% of the students disagreed with the new IB type examination system, and around 70% would have preferred the old system to remain (Junior College Students Council, 1997).

University (see Falzon, 1995a). He argued that the College was never meant to be the only available channel for university studies. University education was to remain open to all holders of the necessary qualifications irrespective of the institution they attended at pre-university level (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 1995b). In spite of these assurances, some (e.g., Malta Union of Teachers, 1994; Alternattiva Demokratika, 1995; Zammit Mangion, 1995) still feared that the College existence would create unhealthy social distinctions between the 'elite' College students and the rest (i.e., students in private sixth forms and in other state post-16 institutions). However, there is no evidence to suggest that College students are either perceived to be special students or that they are given any special treatment once they reach University. If anything, the College is only suffering from such perceptions, if they do exist. Suffice to mention that in spite of the College's self-proclaimed pre-university identity, a number of students still choose to join it without any intention to advance to university – a situation that is affecting negatively both the College programme and resources (see Junior College, 2000, p. 10; Muscat, 2001). Degiorgio (1995) had previously warned about the consequences of ignoring in the reform those students who only enter post-secondary education as an extension of their secondary cycle. He contended that in the pre-College system (which did not distinguish between university and work bound students) only about 55% of the G. F. Abela students eventually entered University. Evidently, some things did not change with the coming of the College. Nowadays, as Lauri and Fiorini (1995) had rightly predicted, most of the students with sufficient qualifications, in spite of College's marketing strategy as a pre-university institution, join the University College irrespective of their future aspirations. Notwithstanding this, combined College and MATSEC statistics reveal that a high percentage of students who start studying at the College eventually do sit for the Matriculation Certificate Examination (consistently circa 83%), which is the key to university education. Moreover, a good number of them manage to obtain it (e.g., circa 59% of those who joined the College in 1995, and 53% of those of 1996).

The First Years of the Junior College

The G. F. Abela Junior College Regulations (Ministry of Education, 1995)²⁴ provide the legal framework to which the Junior College owes its existence. The regulations provide for the former G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum run by the Education Division, with all its moveable and immovable property, to be incorporated under the statute of the University of Malta. The creation of the Junior College thus meant the end of the G. F. Abela Upper Lyceum. Following adverts for teaching posts at the Junior College, the University received over six hundred applications (University of Malta, 1995a). And during the summer of 1995, amidst allegations of injustices, 143 lecturers were selected according to the statute of the University in time for the College opening in October.²⁵ The selected lecturers, as recalled by Serracino Inglott (1996), then Rector of the University, were given “the same status and basic conditions of work as well as analogous duties as all other University academic staff.”²⁶ The teachers of the former Upper Lyceum who were not recruited at the new college (including those who did not apply to join) were given alternative teaching posts in state schools, mostly at the post-secondary level. In due course, some of them joined the College after fresh calls for applications.

A statute regulates the aims and structures of the Junior College (see first schedule of the G. F. Abela Junior College Regulations [Ministry of Education, 1995]). The College statute (section 2) lays down that the aim of the College is “to initiate students

²⁴ Owing to a legal technicality of the 1988 Education Act (see Article 20) the Junior College has had to retain in its official name the reference to Gian Frangisk Abela, the name of the ‘scheduled’ Upper Lyceum that it replaced.

²⁵ All selected, except for eight who were appointed at the grade of lecturer, were engaged as assistant lecturers (Parliamentary Question 29265, 1995). And while two-thirds of the new College academic staff had been teaching at the state G. F. Abela prior to the amalgamation, only slightly more than half of the 169 G. F. Abela original staff eventually joined the College. The Action Committee denounced what it termed as ‘injustices and discrimination’ in the selection process (see The Editor, 1995c). In particular, it claimed that none of those in the forefront of the protests who had applied were selected. The University, after receiving numerous protests from aggrieved applicants, issued a press release (see University of Malta, 1995b) to explain the main criteria adapted throughout the selection process and to deny the Action Committee’s accusations. Following representations, the Ombudsman ruled in favour of a number of cases of non-selected candidates, and eventually some of these found their way to the College. Even the MUT (see ‘Administrative Report 1995’ in Malta Union of Teachers [1996]) had received numerous complaints regarding the selection process. The union, while not contesting the selection process, considered that some of these complaints were justified and merited serious investigation. Eventually, the union made representations with the Minister of Education about this.

²⁶ In particular, the then Rector had reassured in writing the College academic staff that agreements between the MUT and the University would also apply to the College staff as regards both rights and duties. The full realisation of this promise remains unfulfilled to the present day.

who have completed secondary schooling in the methods of study appropriate to tertiary education.” And a Junior College (1997) publication sustains that “ideally, the Junior College student is a prospective University student” (p. 3). This publication (p. 4) includes “developing in the students autonomous abilities of learning, of choosing and of experimenting” as part of the college aims, and relates the College experience to the formation of the students’ all-round personality. These College aims follow by and large the spirit of the Post-Secondary Level National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) (Ministry of Education, 1991) regulations. While the NMC considers the initiation of ‘real specialisation’ as one of the functions of post-16 education, it also aims to empower students with both life and study skills. This is why the NMC invites the students to adopt a holistic approach to knowledge, to become reflective and critical learners, and to start taking charge of their own learning.

After the Labour Party’s return to power in October 1996, in view of the previous statements by prominent party members against the direct link between the Junior College and University, many had feared that the University’s recently re-acquired role in pre-university studies would again be severed. However, a visit in March 1997 to the College by the Labour Minister of Education, Evarist Bartolo, helped to dispel such fears. Junior College administrators and lecturers were verbally assured by the Minister, in the presence of the University Rector, that the newly formed Labour government had no intention of detaching the College away from the University structures. But despite the Minister’s manifest goodwill towards the College staff²⁷, he still considered this institution as one of the educational problems he had inherited from the previous Nationalist administration (see Bartolo, 1998). During that same meeting, Minister Bartolo tried to give concrete meaning to his new commitment. He suggested that a joint committee between the University and the Junior College be set up in order to investigate how cooperation between the two wings of the same institution could be enhanced. This was however an ill-fated initiative that was destined to die before it was born.

²⁷ In the first years, the College academic staff was repeatedly denied access to the University’s Academic Work Resources Fund. It was on the Minister’s personal initiative that a separate amount of money, albeit small and for one year only, was allocated to the College to make up partially for this.

For even though the Junior College was integrated legally within the University structures in 1995, it has yet to be accepted by many of the academics on the main University campus. There have been various accusations from people at the Junior College (e.g., Junior College Academic Staff, 1999; Boffa, 2001; Muscat, 2001) that their colleagues on the main campus, probably the same ones who had resented the *fait accompli* with which the University administration presented them way back in 1995, now make it a point to continually undermine their status and jeopardise their rights. Roger Ellul Micallef, the present Rector of the University, whilst admitting publicly to the existence of this pique, has expressed his desire for it to end (see Schembri, 2001). The extent of this continuing division came forcefully to the fore when the University of Malta Academic Staff Association (UMASA) was formed in 2001. The UMASA founding members invited all the academic members of staff of the University to become members, except for those at the Junior College (see UMASA, n.d.).

The Way Ahead

Now that some years have already passed since its inception and establishment, the Junior College has become a household name with most Maltese, and its existence no longer seems to be an issue of contention. The ‘saga’, at least as far as its existence is concerned, has apparently come to an end. But what are the results? The University had been after a quality leap in post-secondary education (see Camilleri, 1995b). And Wain (1995) had been very hopeful at the outset about the College’s future. He contended that the

Junior School will be effective in the light of its objectives ... because it will be clear about those objectives, because it will adopt a no-nonsense, though democratic, approach to management and discipline, and because it will be organised on sound pedagogical principles. (p. 62)

These preliminary hopes and projections can now certainly do with some critical examination. The initial comments were rather euphoric. The University of Malta (1997), complacent about the higher than expected number of applicants joining the College, described the first year of the Junior College as a big success. And *Value*

2000 (Forum for a Better Economy, 1998) declared the Junior College a successful University venture. Along the same lines, the first College Principal, replying to criticism in a local newspaper regarding reported cases of teacher shortages at the College, claimed that the institution had become a victim of its overwhelming popularity (see Boffa, 1997). The notion that the College is 'a victim of its own success' was subsequently also taken aboard by the next Principal (see Testa, 2000). These and similar 'positive' comments are mostly based on either simple numerical data or on personal experiences, informal feedback, and perceptions.²⁸ The available statistics, rudimentary as they are, show that numerically speaking the College is doing relatively well. The massive presence and impact of the College at sixth form level is undeniable. Whilst its student population is continually increasing (it stood at around 2500 during the 1999-2000 academic year), about three out of every four fully qualified Maltese students following sixth form studies attend the College (National Statistics Office, 2001, p. xxiii). According to MATSEC statistics, the College students account for about between 50% to 60% of the Matriculation Certificate Examination's registrations and passes, and University records reveal that over the past few years about 33% of its freshman had been at the College.

The College's path to progress remains hampered by some gross handicaps such as a number of unmotivated students, staff shortages, lack of space, and inadequate funding (see Muscat, 2001; Wood, 2002). At the same time, the ongoing physical improvements on the College premises (see Boffa, 1998; Wood, 2002) are indeed welcome, even though, in isolation, they can never guarantee or signal an adequate pre-university education. For physical improvements (like the positive numerical descriptors above), however heartening, still fail to enlighten us on the complexity of the Junior College reality. The College ideals, which can neither be analysed numerically nor measured by the physical ambience, are rooted unequivocally in improving the preparation of future university students. Anything other than this is just detail. In truth, the College would only be fulfilling its mission if the response to the question, 'Are Junior College students being adequately prepared for tertiary

²⁸ For instance, Boffa (1999) has opined that the worth of the College reform can be evidenced indirectly from the generally positive comments made on various occasions by, among others, the past and present students, the parents, and successive Ministers of Education and University Rectors. He noted further that the complaints reaching the school administration have more to do usually with the MATSEC examination system than the College itself.

studies?’ were an unqualified ‘Yes’. But the data needed to answer this question are still unavailable. While such an evaluation of the College experience should have been ongoing from the outset, the only remaining sensible thing to do now is to remedy the situation as quickly as possible. The College and University ought to collaborate together in an effort to examine seriously the educational implications of the College experience. This would undoubtedly be an extremely complex and time-consuming exercise that would require research expertise, commitment and coordination. This monitoring should indicate any areas that may need modifications or rethinking. And if effective remedial action were to follow, the ongoing evaluation exercise, apart from indicating from time to time the real worth of the Junior College reform, would ensure that the quality of this educational institution is continually improved upon.

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