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1 Introduction

This report on the state of literacy in Malta is one of a series produced in 2015 and 2016 by ELINET, the European Literacy Policy Network. ELINET was founded in February 2014 and has 78 partner organisations in 28 European countries. ELINET aims to improve literacy policies in its member countries in order to reduce the number of children, young people and adults with low literacy skills. One major tool to achieve this aim is to produce a set of reliable, up-to-date and comprehensive reports on the state of literacy in each country where ELINET has one or more partners, and to provide guidance towards improving literacy policies in those countries. The reports are based (wherever possible) on available, internationally comparable performance data, as well as reliable national data provided (and translated) by our partners.

ELINET continues the work of the European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (HLG) which was established by the European Commission in January 2011 and reported in September 2012. All country reports produced by ELINET use a common theoretical framework which is described here: “ELINET Country Reports – Frame of Reference”.

The Country Reports are organised around the three recommendations of the HLG’s literacy report:

- Creating a literate environment
- Improving the quality of teaching
- Increasing participation, inclusion (and equity).

Within its two-year funding period ELINET has completed Literacy Country Reports for all 30 ELINET member countries. In most cases we published separate Long Reports for specific age groups (Children / Adolescents and Adults), in some cases comprehensive reports covering all age groups. Additionally, for all 30 countries, we published Short Reports covering all age groups, containing the summary of performance data and policy messages of the Long Reports. These reports are accompanied by a collection of good practice examples which cover all age groups and policy areas as well. These examples refer to the European Framework of Good Practice in Raising Literacy Levels; both are to be found in the section “Good Practice”.

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1 For more information about the network and its activities see: www.eli-net.eu.
2 In the following, the final report of the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy is referenced as “HLG report”. This report can be downloaded under the following link: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf.
3 See: http://www.eli-net.eu/research/country-reports/.
4 “Equity” was added by ELINET.
2 General Information about the Maltese Education System

Malta is an archipelago located in the central Mediterranean. The population is concentrated on the three main islands Malta, Gozo and Comino. A survey conducted by Sciriha and Vassallo (2001) indicates that Maltese is the first language for 98.6% of the Maltese population. However, 87% of the Maltese people claim to be proficient in English to various degrees – for example 31.7% of them state to use English well and 39.1% - very good. Maltese and English are used as a medium of instruction in different situations, and to varying degrees depending on the type of school (Michelli, 2001). Consequently, most of the Maltese pupils are able to understand and follow instructions in both languages to certain extent.

The Maltese educational system promotes equity and quality as well as inclusive and free education to all from early childhood education and care to tertiary education in all state institutions. As from 2014 families with working parent/s are entitled to free childcare for children from the age of three months up to two years and nine months, provided by both state and private childcare entities. The school system has three main providers: the State, the Church and the Private sectors.

The Kindergarten centres are operated by the State, Church and Independent Schools and are for children between the ages of two years and nine months and five years. In 2013 the percentage of children from the age of four up to the beginning of compulsory school age attending Kindergarten reached 100%. Formal education in Malta is divided in four stages: early years (from 3 to 6 years), junior years (from 7 to 11 years), middle years (from 11 to 13 years) and secondary years (from 14 to 16 years). Most of the students (about 60%) attend State schools, around 30% attend Church schools and 10% attend the Independent schools. In the last three years of secondary school the students can opt to study one additional vocational subject. After completing their secondary education the

students are awarded a Secondary School Certificate & Profile (SSC&P) that recognizes and values formal, non-formal and informal education. Students may sit for advanced examinations that are a prerequisite for following the programmes available at the upper-secondary and the post-secondary levels.

Even though Maltese students have positive attitudes towards schooling in comparison with their EU and OECD peers, only around 5% of them performed at or above proficiency level 5 on the reading literacy scale when compared to the 8% OECD average (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2013). The low achievement of Maltese ten year-olds in PIRLS 2011 (the mean reading score 477 was significantly lower than the EU average of 535) and that of 15 year-olds in PISA 2009+ (where the percentage 36.3 of low achievers in reading literacy was significantly higher than the EU average of 19.7) led to the development of the National Literacy Strategy for All (2014) and a complementary National Literacy Campaign. They target different sectors of society and aim to ensure that every one in Malta and Gozo is “provided with the best opportunities to acquire the required literacy skills” (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014b, p. 17). The National Literacy Strategy seeks to strengthen the already existing national programmes and to launch new programmes focused on literacy for all ages (e.g. The Aqra Miegħi/Read with Me (0-3 year olds); mobilizing home and classroom libraries; Reading Ambassadors; Reading Champions and Reading Buddies etc.). The National Literacy Agency was set up in 2014 to administer national wide literacy programmes in Malta and Gozo.

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3 Literacy Performance Data

Malta has started participating in international assessment first in PISA 2009+ (reading literacy of 15 year-old students) and then in PIRLS 2011 (reading comprehension of 10 year-old students). Malta also took part in PISA 2016 but the results will be available later this year. Therefore, the date provided in the report does not present changes of reading proficiency over time and it is based only the results of the latest reports.

In PIRLS 2011, students in Malta achieved a mean score on overall reading literacy (477) that was significantly below the EU-24 average of 535. Performance was lower on Literacy texts (470), compared with Informational texts (485), and about the same on the Retrieve & Inference (479) and Interpret, Integrate & Evaluate (475) process subscales. In Malta, 45% of students performed at or below the Low PIRLS benchmark on overall reading – the highest among the EU-24, where the average was 20%. Just 4% of students in Malta performed at the Advanced PIRLS benchmark, compared with an EU-24 average of 9%.

In Malta, the difference between the scores of students at the 10th and 90th percentiles on the PIRLS overall reading scale was 254 points, some 74 points above the EU-24 average of 180. This is indicative of a greater inequality of reading outcomes in Malta than on average across the EU-24, and may reflect students’ varied experience with the language of the PIRLS test (English) at home and at school. In PIRLS 2011, girls in Malta achieved a mean score on overall reading literacy that was 18 points higher than boys. This difference exceeds the EU-24 average of 12 points in favour of girls.

**Challenge:** Fewer students in Malta than the EU-24 average were engaged daily or almost daily in strategies such as identifying main ideas of what they have read, making generalisations and inferences, describing the style or structure of the text, and determining the author’s purpose or intention. This may require reconsideration of both the National Curriculum which deals with language education and teacher preparation. Language education methods which put increased emphasis on textual analyses are to be promoted. Language teachers are to be prepared to implement such strategies.

Results from PISA 2009

According to PISA 2009+ around 88% of 15-year old students in Malta speak Maltese at home and the rest use English. There is no information about the percentage of students and their reading performance based on the language/s they speak at home.

Malta performed 43 points lower than the EU average in PISA 2009+. The pupils whose proficiency level is below level 2 in Malta are 36.3% which is significantly higher than the OECD average of 18.8. The percentage of pupils who performed on level 5 and above is 4.5% which is lower than the OECD average (7.6%).

The Maltese educational system is comprised of different types of schools: state, private church and private independent. The overall performance of female students in reading across the schools is higher than that of male students attending the same school type.

According to PISA 2009+ girls in all the participating countries attained a significantly higher score in reading than boys. However, gender difference in reading performance in Malta was much higher than the EU countries average, 72 scale points compared to an OECD average of 39. The scores in reading
varied significantly between schools. The results of girls in private schools were significantly higher than the EU and OECD averages. However, the mean scores in reading attained by male students attending private schools, female students in Junior Lyceums and students of both sexes in Church schools were similar to EU and OECD average reading scores. Male students in Junior Lyceums and students of both sexes Area secondary schools attained over 100 points less than their peers.

There is a difference of 105 points between the reading scores of pupils who were highly engaged in reading (top quartile), and those who were poorly engaged (bottom quartile). The students who were engaged in reading more often attained significantly higher reading scores in the PISA 2009+ test. The difference between the reading scores of the most and least engaged in reading students in Malta was relatively close to the EU average.

**Challenge:** For Malta a big gender difference in reading performance resulted for both 10 year-olds (PIRLS 2011) and for 15 year-olds (PISA 2009+). In PIRLS 2011, 16% of the Maltese pupils stated that they did not like reading. In PISA 2009+, 34% of the pupils reported that they did not read for pleasure outside of school, and 29.4% spend only 30 minutes or less per day in reading for enjoyment.

PISA findings have shown that reading for pleasure and reading performance are correlated (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to develop more effective methods to increase the reading motivation of pupils, especially that of boys. All the stakeholders: families, teachers, schools and libraries require more support to promote the reading habits of students both at school and beyond.

As Malta did not take part in PIAAC, the OECD’s Survey of Adult Skills, and has not carried out any recent national surveys of adult literacy there is no data available on levels of literacy among the adult population.
4 Key Literacy Policy Areas for Development (age-specific and across age-groups)

4.1 Creating a Literate Environment

The EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy stated the following in relation to creating a more literate environment:

“Creating a more literate environment will help stimulate a culture of reading, i.e. where reading for pleasure is seen as the norm for all children and adults. Such a culture will fuel reading motivation and reading achievement: people who like to read, read more. Because they read more, they read better, and because they read better they read more: a virtuous circle which benefits individuals, families and society as a whole.” (HLG report 2012, p. 41).

Parents play a central role in children’s emergent literacy development. They are the first teachers, and shape children’s language and communication abilities and attitudes to reading by being good reading role models, providing reading materials, and reading to the child.

Schools play an important role in offering a literate environment for students. Schools may foster reading motivation and reading for pleasure in many ways. However, schools do not have sole responsibility. A broad range of actors may shape literacy motivation, from parents and peers to libraries. Particularly this is true in adolescence as it is a crucial phase in life where young people develop long-term identities and self-concepts related to reading and media use (Cf. ELINET Country Reports, Frame of Reference, pp. 29ff, 45f).

4.1.1 Pre-primary years

Creating a literate environment at home: The home learning environment, particularly in the first three years, is extremely important (Brooks et al. 2012). It determines the quantity and quality of interactions between the infant and the primary caregivers, who are the most powerful agents of language development, both receptive and expressive, in the context of everyday activities and experiences. During these years, experience-dependent creation of synapses is maximal. We know that the more words the children are exposed to, the more they can learn. Caregiver-child relations in their turn strongly influence the ability to learn, by influencing self-esteem, general knowledge and motivation.

According to PIRLS 2011 the number of students in Malta whose parents have positive attitudes towards reading (46.5%) is above the European average (35.3%). There are only 8% of the parents who do not like reading, which is significantly less than the European average (17.9%). The importance of parental attitudes to reading is shown by the fact that in Malta there are significant differences in reading performance at Year 4 between children whose parents like to read (average achievement 499) and those who do not (average achievement 460).

Challenge: One of the goals of the National Literacy Strategy (2014) is to “make provision for training courses for parents/caregivers to enable them to support the literacy development of their children”, and to implement “family-friendly measures to enable families to be included in the support and intervention process of children with learning and literacy difficulties” (Ministry for Education and
The Strategy advocates for strengthening of literacy programmes within and outside schools. It seeks also to increase the involvement of parents and strengthen the role of libraries in the literacy development of children. In this regard a number of family literacy programmes have been implemented in recent years, like Aqra Mieghi/Read with Me. These serve also as parental education programmes in the area of literacy.

4.1.2 Children and adolescents

Creating a literate environment in school: PIRLS 2011 showed that 89.7% of students in Malta were in classrooms which had class library, which was above the EU-24 average of 72.9% (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table H2). 48.7% of students were in classrooms which had more than 50 books, and which is above the EU-24 average of 32.1% (ibid.). Additionally, 75.1% of students were taken on a visit to the public library by their teachers at least once a month, compared to the EU-24 average of 65%. (Mullis et al. 2012a, exh. 8.13, p.240; EU averages from PIRLS 2011 database, s. Table H2 in Appendix C).

Challenge: In PIRLS 2011 about 10% of the students in Malta reported not having a classroom library or that an insufficient number of books was available (50% had less than 50 books).

The National Literacy Strategy (2014) promotes the importance of increased literacy projects, funded by the government and other sources in order to improve the quality of home and school libraries and to extend their access and use. One such project: “Aqra Kemm Tiflaħ” (“Mobilising classroom libraries”) run by the National Literacy Agency is specifically intended to provide 100 books in Maltese and English to every Primary classroom.

Offering digital literacy learning opportunities in schools (and other public spaces, e.g. libraries): The National Literacy Strategy recommends that all stakeholders should be involved in the development of language and literacy through digital technologies. Increased training is being provided to teachers and parents to enable them to support their children in the use of digital technologies.

The eContent available for schools is to be adapted better to the needs of the learners and schools are to be supported to be able to do this. A pilot project involving one to one technologies, namely tablets has been implemented and reviewed.

Strengthening the role of public libraries: Students should be made more aware of the benefits using a library. A current programme is that of “Living libraries“ which collaborates with formal and non-formal educational institutions. The project focuses on young people. People from different industries make presentations and the young people are encouraged to create living installations using audio-visual material based on different information sources as well as self-produced print (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014d, p. 43).

Improving literate environments for children and adolescents: Programmes, initiatives and examples: Reading to children is a predictor of their future literacy achievement. The Maltese government recognizes this and through the National Literacy Agency is extending the current early and family literacy programmes to increase awareness among parents about the importance of literacy skills in the early years. These programmes are aimed mainly at families with a low socio-economic status. They are intended to improve children’s literacy and socio-emotional development as well as to encourage the involvement of parents and caregivers in the literacy development of their children (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014d, p. 10).
The National Literacy Agency of Malta is responsible for promoting and implementing the National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo (2014). It collaborates with other government departments and non-governmental organizations to promote literacy as widely as possible. Some of the activities organised by the Agency are:

**Aqra Miegħi/Read with Me** is a literacy programme for families with children from 0 to 3 years. It is offered in 50 centres in Malta and Gozo;  

**Seħer l-Istejjer/ The Magic of Stories** is a family literacy programme intended for children of 4 to 6 years and their parents;  

**Aqra kemm Tiflaħ** seeks to provide attractive, high quality and high interest books to classroom libraries in primary and middle schools;  

**Aqra fis-Sajf/Summer Reading** is a programme held during the summer in order to promote the love for reading while the students are not at school;  

**Reading Ambassadors** is a programme which involves popular Maltese personalities who promote a love for reading in schools;  

**Reading Champions** is a national contest for students from Middle schools. It encourages them to act as role models to their peers and to promote the importance of reading in both Maltese and English. Struggling readers who make an effort to read are rewarded too.  

**NWAR** is an afterschool programme for children and their parents. The sessions are usually held at the local library or the local council.

### 4.1.3 Adults

**Fostering literacy provision for adults:** Literacy is major pillar of the Maltese Government’s Education policy and recent policy documents including the 1994 National Literacy Strategy, the Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta, and the Draft Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020, place significant emphasis on the importance of effective adult literacy provision.

Currently the main providers of adult literacy courses are the Directorate for Lifelong Learning and Early School Leavers (DLL ESL), the Malta College of Arts Science and Technology (MCAST) and the Employment and Training Corporation (ETC). All three entities offer literacy programmes for adult learners (16+) without formal qualifications. Individual support and group courses are run in core competences such as language skills and computer literacy. The Directorate provides core competence courses in Maltese, English, Numeracy and Computer Awareness: these courses run for 32 weeks, with two hours of classes per week and take place in Adult Learning Centres, Local Councils and Community Centres. In October 2013, the Directorate started a programme of basic skills courses in Maltese, English and numeracy which are decentralised and offered in Local Councils, community centres (e.g. Paolo Freire Institute) and non-governmental organisations. Learning programmes were also designed for the specific needs of employees in a number of organisations and companies including Farsons, the Malta Armed Forces, HSBC and Methode. A partnership was created between the Directorate and the Department for Local Government (DLG) so that Local Councils may actively participate in providing adult literacy courses in their localities, bringing learning closer to the community. To date, courses offered are mainly related to basic literacy and foreign language teaching. The Directorate also

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8 See: http://aqrastorja.skola.edu.mt/.
works with other NGOs to provide basic literacy and digital literacy skills to vulnerable groups. The Directorate also piloted literacy and numeracy projects with companies on an ad hoc basis. The success of such pilot schemes indicates a latent demand for customised courses for industry and their value needs to be communicated more effectively to enterprise. Adult Literacy courses are funded through central government funding. In Malta, basic skills lifelong learning classes are offered free of charge while MQF level 1 courses are offered at a subsidised rate.

Regarding the way forward for adult literacy provision, the Literacy Strategy identifies the following main priorities:

- Increasing opportunities for the professional development of adult literacy educators of Maltese and English.
- Promoting the development of tools and materials for the teaching of literacy to adults in Maltese and English.
- Establishing an efficient and reliable accreditation system for adult Basic skills programmes. Service providers are to be made aware of the benefits of such accreditation.
- Increasing opportunities for family literacy programmes.
- Involving further Local Councils and local Libraries in community based strategies for adult literacy.
- Making further provision for Literacy for Employment programmes for unemployed and low-skilled adults.
- Offering Basic skills and literacy programmes to prison inmates for better reintegration in society. These may be linked to the parole system in order to encourage increased participation.
- Ensuring that persons with learning difficulties and disabilities are helped to improve their literacy skills through bespoke programmes, also through the use of technology.
- Promoting training schemes with employers to provide literacy and basic education courses at the workplace.
4.2 Improving the Quality of Teaching

The quality of teaching consists of several aspects:

- the quality of preschool
- coherent literacy curricula
- high-quality reading instruction,
- early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners
- highly qualified teachers (cf. Frame of Reference for ELINET Country Reports).

Particularly crucial is the quality of teaching and of teachers, as the report *How the world best performing school systems come out on top* (McKinsey et al. 2007) states: “The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers”. In this regard one is to note recent developments in the preparation of teachers and their continuing professional development. As from 2016 all newly-qualified teachers in Malta will be required to obtain a Master’s in Teaching and Learning (MTL). The continuing professional development of teachers will be managed by the Institute for Education of the Ministry for Education set up in 2015.

4.2.1 Pre-primary years

**Improving the quality of preschool education:** So far early childhood educators in Malta were expected to have 2 years of post-secondary relevant training at ISCED 4 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014, p. 101). As from 2015/2016 they will be expected to obtain a Bachelor degree, which involves either four years of University study or two years of University study for holders of the MCAST-BTEC Higher National Diploma in Advanced Studies in Early Years (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014, p. 180).

Malta is one of the 13 countries referred to in the “Teaching reading in Europe” (2011) report which gave emergent literacy a very comprehensive coverage in their curricula. The Maltese guidelines for kindergarten education state that the child needs to develop a number of skills and concepts to be able to learn to read and write in both Maltese and English (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015).

The Maltese early childhood settings offer the children both print-rich and digital environment which is stimulating the development of their language and literacy skills in a meaningful and purposeful context (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015). The libraries in the classrooms are perceived as an integral part of the classroom environment and their role in children’s literacy development is highly valued (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014b, p. 35).

Both the National Literacy Strategy and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) recognise the importance of oracy as a precursor of literacy. Parents have an important role to play in this regard. The NCF states that by the end of the Early Years Cycle (Year 2): children should be able to use different forms of media for communication; should be able to engage with texts and be aware of the purpose and use of print materials; should be familiar with numbers, symbols and patterns and their use; should be aware of both language systems used in Malta; should know how to engage appropriately with digital literacy etc. (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012, p. 22).
4.2.2 Children and adolescents

Improving Literacy Curricula and Reading instruction in schools: In Malta, reading is taught as part of the language curriculum in Maltese and in English (Mullis et al. 2012b, Vol.1, exhibit 5, p. 30, 31). In the rationale for the current primary curriculum for English at Years 1 – 6⁹, it is stated that “the four language modes/skills should be integrated in an approach whereby every lesson should ideally incorporate listening, speaking, reading and writing”, and teachers are advised to “use activities that promote receptive skills (Listening and Reading) which lead to productive skills (Speaking and Writing)”. The integration of language activities is also supported by the recommendation in the curriculum rationale to develop thematic and cross-curricular approaches whereby the following modes are to be integrated: linguistic (vocabulary and grammatical) structures, viewing and listening comprehension, speaking including intonation and pronunciation, reading, writing, and effective use of information technology.

During the secondary school years, literacy remains one of the primary themes within the National Curriculum Framework (2011) and language is still considered as the main instrument for this to happen. Therefore, all teachers are expected to recognise the importance of language and literacy competence in all subjects. However, the proportion of time allocated to the teaching of Maltese and English at secondary level is low when compared to the primary level. This is also due to the wide range of subjects which are included in the secondary school curriculum.

The teaching in Malta is done mainly through predetermined curriculum content and textbooks. However, the teachers are at liberty to choose the teaching activities and methods (Key Data on Education in Europe). The areas which require further improvement and are identified by the National Literacy Strategy For All (2014) are the following:

- assessing the situation in literacy and drawing up action plans; promoting Balanced Literacy teaching and learning;
- providing more Reading Time developing literacy performance portfolio for students with literacy difficulties;
- developing Alternative Learning Programmes;
- extending school libraries;
- increasing the opportunities for capacity building and continuous professional development;
- promoting dyslexia-friendly schools;
- promoting programmes in Basic skills intended for young people;
- more effective use of new technologies and social networks in the teaching of literacy.

Digital literacy as part of the curriculum for primary and secondary schools: Digital literacy is part of the curriculum in Malta. All schools are required to follow the National Curriculum Framework (2012). There are national strategies covering training measures for ICT in schools, digital/media literacy, e-skills development, training research projects in e-learning and e-inclusion. There are central steering documents for all ICT learning objectives. According to these official steering documents, students and teachers should use ICT in all subjects in class and for complementary activities. At secondary level ICT is also taught as a separate subject. In Malta ICT is integrated into the secondary school curriculum as a cross-curricular competence. Students are required to acquire skills related to

email and programming, and to learn to recognize, to understand as well as to compare and to select useful information (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012). Teacher education and continuing professional development courses are provided to educators (European Schoolnet, 2013).

**Challenge:** The National Literacy Strategy suggests that all stakeholders should be involved in the development of language and literacy through digital technologies. Increased training is being provided to teachers and parents to enable them to support their children in the use of digital technologies.

The eContent available for schools is to be adapted better to the needs of the learners and schools are to be supported to be able to do this. A pilot project involving one to one technologies, namely tablets has been implemented and reviewed (Ministry of Education and Employment, Malta (2015) Report on the Tablet’s Pilot Study in Maltese Primary Schools).

**Early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners:** The State’s School Psychological Services provides psycho-educational assessment and intervention service for students with regard to physical, mental, perceptual, emotional and behavioural difficulties. They collaborate with Child Development Assessment Unit on the assessment and identification of pupils with special needs (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2014). There are national benchmarking examinations at Year 6 for speaking, listening, reading comprehension and writing in both Maltese and English.

The Education Act (2013) states that the Minister shall ensure that the national policy on inclusive education is being applied in all schools, and that the resources, tools and facilities required are available, so that such an education may be given as effectively as possible. The Minister shall also ensure that a) there exist specialised Centres of Resources, which support schools and colleges in the implementation of the policy of inclusive education by giving service to students who have specific learning difficulties, and b) other Centres, which provide education and training services to students with individual educational needs whose educational entitlement may be better achieved in such centres. (Part 5: §58 – 1 & 2).

**Challenge:** It seems that although a solid and robust assessment regime is in place, further work needs to be done with regard to designing and implementing research-based, age-appropriate educational intervention, and better coordination among the relevant service providers. This would ensure that a larger number of students register the required educational progress.

The National Literacy Strategy for All (2014) seeks to enhance the literacy skills of Maltese learners. The main actions implemented include research groups to address areas of relevance, national reading campaigns, increased opportunities for reading time, and the use of new technologies in the teaching and learning of literacy.

The Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta seeks to extend the use of mobile technologies and e-learning in schools, in order to meet better the needs of students at risk of failure (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014b, pp. 24–25). It suggests also a school-based Alternative Learning Programme to be established for students whose learning needs are not catered for by the ordinary mainstream curriculum (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014b, p. 41).
Improving the quality of pre-service and in-service teacher education: From October 2016, teachers in Malta will be trained at Master’s level. Besides knowledge of their subject, trainee teachers need to acquire professional skills. Their professional education includes both theoretical studies (the educational theory of teaching, psychology, etc.) and practical training in schools, the observation of teaching, and possibly some time spent assuming direct responsibility for it. Most countries specify a minimum period for professional training. The main model for minimum professional training, including in-school placements (in ECTS) in Malta is of 90 credits, the minimum in-school placements is of 30 credits. Other existing model including in-school placements (in ECTS) in Malta is of 60 credits, the minimum in-school placement is of 20 credits.

In Malta prospective teachers follow specific modules in reading and writing difficulties for young learners and for adolescents (Faculty of Education, University of Malta Course Programmes, 2015).

Throughout the year CPD in literacy is organised for classroom and specialist teachers on a monthly basis by the National Literacy Agency. So far the provision of CPD in Malta has been somewhat sporadic and fragmenting. In 2015 an Institute of Professional Development in Education has been set up. This will seek to offer CPD on a systematic and structured basis in order to meet the actual needs of educators and educational administrators.

Challenge: When compared to the most European countries, early childhood educators in Malta have generally lower qualifications. Early childhood education in Malta needs more qualified teachers (in possession of at least a Bachelor degree). Moreover, the early childhood educators, who are already in employment, should receive additional professional development.

Research shows that it is beneficial to have male teachers working in early childhood education settings. Therefore, a concerted effort should be made to recruit more male early childhood educators (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014).

There exists already a Quality Assurance Department (QAD) within the Ministry for Education, which seeks to ensure that educational standards are maintained in schools. The Quality Assurance function of the Council for the Teaching Profession is to be strengthened further.

Initial teacher education in Malta requires a more specific focus on literacy acquisition and development. Whereas, this is the case to some extent for the language areas and subjects, increased emphasis on literacy is to be put in the initial teacher education curricula for non-language areas and subjects. Specific attention needs to be given also to bilingual and plurilingual issues.

Improving the quality of literacy instruction: Programmes, initiatives and examples: Based on PIRLS 2011, 80.8% of the students in Malta were taught by teachers who implemented instructional practices to engage learning in "most lessons", which indicates a high level of engagement in the Maltese classrooms. However, the proportion of students engaged in specific reading comprehension strategies is relatively low.

In 2011, pupils in Malta spent 891 hours per year on language and reading instruction at school when compared to the EU-24 average of 850 hours. Students in Malta spent 181 hours (about 20%) on instruction in the language of the PIRLS test, compared to an EU-24 average of 241 hours. In Malta, 37 instructional hours per year were spent on reading as part of the language programme, compared to the EU-24 average of 68. This EU-24 average is in itself low when compared to the averages of the

10 See: http://www.um.edu.mt/educ/programme/UBEHPRE-2010-1-O.
United States and New Zealand (both 131 hours). Teachers in Malta reported allocating less time to the teaching reading across the curriculum and in reading classes (103 instructional hours per year) when compared to the EU-24 average of 147 hours (PIRLS 2011- (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 214, Exhibit 8.4). EU averages from PIRLS 2011 database (see ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table I3). According to Mullis et al., response rates from teachers in Malta were lower than expected on items dealing with instructional time. However, the Maltese curriculum specifies that 15% of instructional time (in Years 1-4) should be spent on language/reading time in English and 15% in Maltese (Mullis et al., 2012, Vol. 1, Exhibit 6).

A number of recommendations put forward by the National Literacy Strategy (2014) have been or are in the process of being implemented. These include:

- more research needs to be conducted in the area of bilingualism and its implication of early literacy development in Malta;
- Literacy Teams led by a head of department in charge of literacy in consultation with the Education Officers for Maltese, English and Literacy and composed of class teachers, complementary and support teachers need to be set up within each College in Malta;
- the teams should use the Literacy Handbook procedures as a departure point and should also seek alternative ways of reaching their literacy targets;
- schools have to develop Literacy Action Plans;
- learners with literacy difficulties should be identified by the end of Year 3;
- Continuing Professional Development should be provided to all teachers, Learning Support Assistants and to the members of the Senior Management Team in order to prepare them for better planning, effective delivery and review of the implementation of the school-based literacy strategy.

4.2.3 Adults

**Monitoring the quality of adult literacy providers:** The DLL ESL is required to offer a comprehensive quality assurance system based on regular inspections and audits of adult education courses in line with transparent, quality management criteria. The National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE) sets the quality standards in relation to accreditation to help bring much-needed accountability, quality assurance and transparency in the adult learning sector. However there is still much more development required in this area.

**Developing curricula for adult literacy:** The National Curriculum Framework recognises the importance of literacy as a cross-curricular theme and essential for all students. The curriculum for literacy courses was largely based on the school curriculum. Three levels have been established for DLL courses in adult literacy and numeracy – Core Competence (Basic/Entry Level), Level 1 and Level 2 – with each level aligned to a number of key skills.

**Improving the qualification and status of teachers of adult literacy:** Adult educators working on DLL courses are required to have a teacher’s warrant and/or qualifications, and/or previous experience as an Adult Educator in the relevant subject/s. The DLL also offers a Diploma in Teaching Adults at Level 5 to encourage up-skilling and specialisation in Adult Education. The Diploma consists of 18 modules and students can chose which and how many modules to take. Although students must pay to take this course, it has been over-subscribed since its launch in 2014. In addition, adult literacy educators are offered paid CPD sessions on a yearly basis, but these are not compulsory.
Those teaching in adult education in Malta are likely to have other full time employment and are mostly employed hourly paid contracts plus bonuses. As a result the job of adult educator may be perceived by some as a secondary commitment.

4.3 Increasing Participation, Inclusion and Equity

The High Level Group of Experts on Literacy drew attention to persistent gaps in literacy, namely the gender gap, the socio-economic gap, and the migrant gap (HLG Final report 2012, pp. 46–50). These gaps derive from the reading literacy studies that repeatedly show unequal distribution of results among groups of children and adolescents (PIRLS, PISA).

4.3.1 Pre-primary years

**Encouraging preschool attendance, especially for disadvantaged children:** No child should be excluded from preschool because parents cannot afford to send their children to preschool/kindergarten institutions if they have to pay. Malta belongs to the half of the European countries where the entire period of ECEC is free. In April 2014, the entitlement to free ECEC provision was extended to all children of working/studying parents (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014). Public kindergarten centres (attended by circa 98% of children) are also free of charge and even offer one glass of milk per child daily and one free portion of fruit or vegetables per week (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014, p. 180).

**Identification of and support for preschool children with language difficulties:** The NCF National Curriculum Framework (2012) embraces diversity and promotes it through an inclusive environment. The NCF addresses the different needs of: gifted and talented learners; learners with special educational needs; learners with severe disabilities; learners from disadvantaged social backgrounds; learners from diverse social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds including children of refugees and asylum seekers. On-going support and professional development are provided for the teachers in order to ensure the provision of high quality education and a supportive infrastructure, providing the conditions and opportunities for learners to achieve their full potential and for teachers and administrators to implement the curriculum effectively.

A number of services for children with learning difficulties and disabilities are offered at school and within the community. These take the form of multidisciplinary assessment, statementing, complementary education, literacy enhancement programmes, and counselling. This policy seeks to ensure better integration and further development of the existing programmes. Courses building the child’s language skills during daily routines and activities are also offered to parents, whose children are developing their language skills slower than the others (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014).

4.3.2 Children and adolescents

**Support for children with special needs:** Inclusive and special education in Malta is an educational priority. The regulations are reviewed frequently. Learning support is provided by LSAs. Specific training in this area is provided to class and support teachers. In 2007, the Student Services Department (SSD) in the Directorate for Educational Services (DES) was established. In 2008 service managers to administer the Inclusive Education Section, Special Education and Resource Centres and Psycho-Social Service were appointed. Learners with special needs are included at all levels of the educational system. Some of them manage to move also into tertiary education.
Support for migrant children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school: In most of the Maltese state primary schools, complementary education and language teachers support the language learning of migrant learners in order to facilitate their social, cultural and educational integration. In the secondary sector some of them are given the opportunity to attend additional classes in Maltese and English or are assigned to a Core Competences Support Programme. Moreover, book-rich environments are promoted especially to learners and families lacking literacy materials at home (national literacy strategy).

In 2011, the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) set up a working group to develop a National Strategy addressing the different needs of migrant children with emphasis on language learning and identifying the particular communication problems which they experience. Some recommendations for work inside and outside the classroom were made and the children have the possibility to attend a year-long programme for developing basic language skills to help their integration in the schools. As a result of this a National Language Integration Unit was set up which engages language teachers for these specific purposes.

Preventing early school leaving: Under the Strategic plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta, an Early School Leaving Working Group was established. The main objectives of the group are: to determine, coordinate and monitor services that address the needs of children and young people who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging in specific local conditions; ensure that pro-active preventive measures are in place; establish support mechanisms that parents, families and carers may require to better support children or young persons (Department of Curriculum Management, n.d.; Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014a). There are also annual, end–of–year examinations at secondary level.

Increasing participation, inclusion and equity for children and adolescents: Programmes, initiatives and examples

Programmes against poverty: The Maltese Education Strategy aligns all sectoral education strategies and policies. The aim of the strategy is to support educational achievement of children at-risk-of-poverty and from low socio-economic status, and to reduce the relatively high incidence of early school-leavers. It seeks to achieve this through:

- **Free Childcare Support Services** – since 1st of April 2014. The main beneficiaries of the scheme are working parents and parents who are still studying;
- **Breakfast Clubs for Children** – this is a complementary service offered to children one hour before the start of school (Employment Strategy, 2014 p. 65-66)

Moreover, Agenzia Sedqa, the National Social Support Agency, organises parenting skills courses, Inrabbu 'l Uliedna Aħjar, one for parents of children up to 10 years of age, and another one for parents of older children. Programmes promoting the literacy development of children through story-telling etc are also available for parents and caregivers (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014b).

**Family literacy programmes for migrant parents:** Parental involvement in the education of their children is considered to be an important factor for schools. This is especially the case for the parents of migrant children, who face many challenges. Schools are encouraged to organise specific programmes for the involvement of migrant parents. Some other schools organise meetings with community leaders. Many schools organise activities to promote multiculturalism in order to integrate better migrant students and their parents. For example one of the schools organises a multicultural
and a language awareness day. During these days children work on multicultural projects, which are then presented to the parents. Other strategies which are employed by schools to support and integrate migrant students and parents include: training of staff, learning support coordinators and assistants, mentors, school counselling, extra tuition in Maltese and English as a foreign language; integration programmes, classroom based initiatives, the Let Me Learn programme, sports activities, language clubs, guidance teachers, alternative learning programmes, etc. (UNHCR & Aditus, 2012).

**Programmes to prevent early school leaving:** In recent years a number of measures to prevent early school leaving as laid down by ‘The Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta’ have been implemented.

**Challenges:** The Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta suggested positive actions focused on making the school a positive and beneficial experience for all students. Such preventive measures are expected to have long-term effects. Some of them were:

- providing free childcare;
- rendering schools relevant and of benefit for every student. Schools are to address the different needs of the students with different abilities, from different culture and of different ethnic origins;
- educating for and through diversity;
- meeting the needs of high achievers;
- creating caring community schools;
- supporting children at-risk through innovative teaching and learning tools, and school- and community-based solutions;
- developing e-Learning content to respond better respond to student learning needs;
- tapping mobile technology for increased student engagement. Tablets will be introduced as a teaching and learning tool in the Maltese classrooms;
- reintroducing vocational education in the secondary schools as an alternative learning path;
- providing of a good career guidance service, which will enable students to consider different learning possibilities and careers;
- strengthening the transition process across educational pathways;
- involving parents in the education of their children from an early age. Parental education is to be offered;
- supporting teachers to address the Early School Leaving challenges.

A number of these measures have been or are in the process of being implemented.

4.3.3 Adults

**Increasing offers for second-language learners:** DLL courses are open to migrants and the English as a foreign language (EFL) and the Maltese as a foreign language courses (MFL) are specifically targeted to migrants. Apart from the DLL courses, a number of NGOs offer a number of literacy courses to migrants. The draft Lifelong Learning Strategy proposes a number of initiatives to develop adult learning programmes to facilitate integration of migrants in Maltese society, including the establishment of a working group to develop adult learning programmes to activate and facilitate the integration of migrants in Maltese society. The working group will be coordinated by the Directorate of Lifelong Learning in conjunction with ETC, and include participation from NGOs active in the field. The
primary objectives of the group are to identify and remove barriers to adult learning among migrants, particularly those not in education, employment and training (NEETs). There should be no discrimination between economic, regular or irregular migrants.

Third country nationals who have been accepted for long term residency and social welfare recipients do not pay for these courses. For DLL courses there are no specialist teachers.
5 Conclusions

Much has been achieved in the area of literacy in Malta in recent years. Levels of literacy are a predictor of the future educational and economical development of a country. The Maltese government recognizes this and through the National Literacy Agency is extending the current early and family literacy programmes to increase awareness among parents about the importance of literacy skills in the early years. These programmes are aimed mainly at families with a low socio-economic status. They are intended to improve children's literacy and socio-emotional development as well as to encourage the involvement of parents and caregivers in the literacy development of their children.

Literacy performance data for Malta from national and international assessments has shown that many challenges remain in the field of literacy. A culture change is to be brought by stakeholders like schools, parents, educational institutions and the public at large. In the long run increased investment in better quality teaching, early childhood education, basic skills education, and teacher preparation and education will help to address in an effective manner the issues of low levels of basic skills and early school leaving. The measures being taken for the improvement of literacy standards in families, preschool, primary and secondary school settings are to be reviewed and improved consistently to ensure continuing and increased effectiveness. Adult and lifelong learning are to become part of the continuing education process for people in and out of employment. Technology is to be harnessed to ensure a more transformative and greater reach of these measures.
6 References


