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The Perception on the Introduction of Hospitality as a Vocational Subject in Compulsory Education.

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Authorship Statement

This dissertation is based on the results of research carried out by myself, is my composition, and has not been previously presented for any other certified or uncertified qualification.

The research was carried out under the supervision of Mr. Andrew Debattista.

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Abstract

The purpose of the research is to establish the perceptions of hospitality educators in secondary schools and staff at the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS), and the perceptions of personnel within the industry, towards the introduction of hospitality as a vocational subject in secondary schools. Current literature on vocational education reveals the history and journey of vocational education in Malta and the vocational educational strategy used in different European countries. The concept of perception and the perception of students, educators, the general public, and the labour market were addressed, however, all of these studies were held on general VET courses, rather than on a specific programme. This study aims to reduce the gap in literature which focuses on the programme of vocational and applied hospitality being implemented in obligatory education in Malta.

By adopting a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology, three focus groups were gathered, with participants being secondary schools educators, post-secondary institutions staff and those working within the industry. The use of thematic narrative analysis aided the researcher to develop eight themes, which disclosed the characteristics of the hospitality programme and ultimately revealed the needed perceptions from the participants. Findings from narratives of educators and post-secondary staff showed, that the assessment used in the programme is valid and fair, yet extremely rigid. Furthermore, all the participants in this study highlighted the issue that educators teaching the subject - despite being highly knowledgeable and holding a teaching degree, are not trained enough, especially in practical skills. It also established that the majority of these educators, do not possess any practical working experience within the industry. In addition, the parents' involvement and perception of the subject, suggested that they doctrinate the perception that the hospitality industry targets low achievers. Findinds also revelead a clear discrepancy between state and non-state schools, when it comes to human and physical resources. Moreover, this study revealed that a shift in pedagogy is required – that of embracing more practical aspects rather than theoretical, by implementing a holistic teaching approach.

Keywords: Narrative Inquiry, Hospitality subject in obligatory education, Perception, Vocational Education, VET Malta.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher highlighted the structure and partitioning of the research study. First, the researcher stated the aim of the research and then justified the research problem - including a brief background of the study. Furthermore, the researcher outlined the study's relevance and importance in understanding the perceptions of all the participants. This was achieved through the main research question and possible sub-questions which are highlighted in this chapter.

1.1 Research Aim

The aim of this study seeks to establish the perceptions of hospitality teachers in secondary schools, staff at the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS), and personnel from the industry, towards the introduction of hospitality as a vocational subject in secondary schools.

1.2 Topic and background

Vocational subjects in obligatory education in Malta were reintroduced in 2011 under BTEC qualification, running under Maltese qualification for the past six years. The main problem with such a study is that there is no specific literature on the introduction of vocational subjects within secondary schools, as the concept is relatively new to Malta. The researcher had been a pioneer in the introduction of Hospitality as an option subject for year 9 students. Initially, the researcher was involved in syllabus planning and had taught the subject for eight years. Later, after being appointed as an Education Officer of the subject, the researcher was involved in syllabus writing, teacher-training and the introduction of Applied Hospitality. The researcher was also responsible for the provision of resources to all state schools - including state-of-the-art workshops, which simulate the industry and build a bridge between schools and post-secondary institutions and businesses within the industry. The subject is offered as an option choice for students and educators who have 160 minutes of contact time per week, which is divided into two for approximately twenty-five weeks in a scholastic year. The subject is taught over three years, where one unit is covered in one scholastic year. The qualification is offered at MQF Levels 1, 2, and 3 incorporated in one assessment syllabus. By the end of the course, the student can achieve a qualification up to Level 3. However, despite all the work conducted and strategies implemented, little is known of the effect that the

introduction of vocational subjects have had on post-secondary institutions and the industries. During the 2019/2020 scholastic year, 903 students started studying Hospitality in secondary schools (MEDE, 2020) and 865 students started their studies at the Institute of Tourism Studies, ranging from Level 1 to Level 7 courses (ITS, 2021). This influenced this research to find out the perceptions of those within the educational sector and of those within the local hospitality and tourism industry, so as to illustrate the validity and value of the VET programme. The latter is the main research question of this research.

To date, there has been no empirical research on this topic - despite its significance. Therefeore, this study addressed this gap in literature, while provided a foundation for further research in the area. Due to this lack of research on the topic, the researcher opted for a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology, with a thematic narrative analysis. From its findings, the researcher analysed themes emerging from the narratives and compared perceptions between academics at different levels and the industry. Moreover, suggestions were proposed on the way forward, to tackle the various challenges and perceptions on the topic being researched.

1.3 Relevance and Importance

The proposed research is important to consider, since it is the first study being conducted locally on vocational education and training for the subject of Hospitality within secondary schools in Malta. The various perceptions of those within the academic side, as well as from those within the industry, are an impeccable source for further improvements of the programme being offered to prospective students at the Institute for Tourism Studies, as they are the prospective future employees within the Hospitality and Tourism industry. The research method used within this study allowed the researcher to answer the research questions and obtain a clearer perception of the stakeholders. This was done by having focus groups to initiate an in-depth discussion, reflection and arguments about the programme. The main limitation of this research was the lack of specific literature on vocational education within compulsory education, due to the fact that Malta is one of the very few countries that offers VET subjects from such a young age in Europe. The reintroduction of vocational education and training in compulsory education is quite recent and the two main institutions who offer teaching degrees, have recently started offering teacher training in vocational education. This therefore creates a literature

gap, as no or few studies have been conducted on the subject matter, with most of them not yet published. A narrative inquiry methodology was used to conduct this research, so as to emanate themes and compare the perceptions of different people from different sectors about vocational education, specifically on Hospitality.

1.4 Research Question

The main research question for this study was:

RQ.1 What are the perceptions of educators, staff at post-secondary institutions focusing on tourism studies, and personnel from the industry about the introduction of Hospitality as a vocational subject within compulsory education?

Other sub-questions were addressed to provide further focus on the research:

SQ.1 What expected impacts will the introduction of the Hospitality subject leave on the post-secondary education and the industry leave?

SQ.2 How can academia and industry come together to meet and exceed expectations of future employees, and future market needs?

1.5 Overview of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter outlined an overview of the study carried out. It underlined the research aim and the research problem being addressed. It also stated the main research question together with the sub-questions. This will help the reader get a better understanding of the subject matter, before delving into the research study itself. Furthermore, this chapter included an insight into the relevance of this study being carried out. By discovering the perceptions of all the personnel participating in the study, this helped the researcher to plan a way forward for the Hospitality subject to continue to grow and evolve according to the industry's and the academics' needs.

In the second chapter, the researcher highlighted a detailed literature review. Through literature, the research problem was justified, and consequently, pockets in the literature were discovered, leading to the formulation of the research question. In the first part of the literature review, the researcher gave an introduction and background of the vocational education and training in Malta, in comparison to vocational education in European countries. Theorems and programmes on vocational education were highly discussed, providing the reader with good insight

into the Hospitality subject. Further in the literature, the perception context was explained in detail - including perceptions from educators, students, the labour market, and the general public on the need for VET programmes. Such literature revealed the lack of empirical studies on the perceptions of vocational education.

In the third chapter, the research methodology was identified and justified, including ethical considerations, which make the research study ethically sound. The researcher justified her philosophical position, by setting aside any post-positivist quantitative methodology and adhered to a qualitative methodology. Acknowledging and adhering to this philosophical position, together with an appropriate methodology, ensured quality in the research findings. The researcher was interested in the experiences and perceptions of the participants who relate to the Hospitality subject; thus a narrative inquiry methodology was the best option to utilise. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed for the narratives to be unveiled. By using a thematic narrative analysis combined with MAXQDA software, the researcher identified emerging themes for the study.

In the fourth chapter, findings from the narratives through the use of MAXQDA software were highlighted. Each focus group was thoroughly analysed and the findings themselves revealed themes emerging from the narratives.

In the fifth chapter, emerging themes were individually discussed and the outcomes of the research were highlighted. The themes themselves incorporate any similarities or differences, as well as, important perceptions amongst the three focus groups. Furthermore, the researcher also discussed whether the research question was fully answered or not.

The final sixth chapter incorporated conclusions, recommendations, and limitations of the study. The researcher acknowledged that further improvements can be achieved and that more research is needed to tackle other various perspectives in the hospitality subject.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Vocational Education and Training in Malta: Malta's Historical Views

Malta has been offering Vocational Education and Training (VET) since the 14th century; a time where there was a focus on the building trade, furniture production, and silver work. Following this, between the 16th and 18th centuries, the order of the Knights of St John introduced training for shipbuilding repair and set up the very first trade school of navigation. The British strengthened this sector, yet technical education was enforced after World War II. Employers were given the responsibility of investing in staff training and regulating apprenticeships under the Industrial Training Act in 1952 (Cedefop, 2017).

The need for trade schools was on the rise and the government launched several secondary technical schools between the 1950s and 1960s. The Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) – which was known as the polytechnic at the time, offered various programmes in numerous trades such as commerce and business studies, mechanical, civil and electrical engineering, and hotel administration. However, despite the high demand and increase in popularity of this college, the Polytechnic school shut its doors in 1977. The compulsory education system was reformed in the 1970s and trade schools were set up for students who felt that academic schooling was not for them. However, by the early 1990s, trade schools received less consideration than mainstream education, leading the country to phase out VET options at compulsory education. The only trade-specific school at the time was the Institute for Tourism Studies, which was set up in 1987 and had been running since then. MCAST re-transpired in 2001. This was the beginning of a new era of vocational education and training in Malta and it has been developing high-quality educational programmes and training ever since (Cedefop, 2017).

In 2011, the Ministry for Education and Employment introduced a new strategic plan to implement VET training for students within compulsory education, so as to strengthen the employability skills and education for all policies within the new National Curriculum Framework. A pilot study was conducted under the BTEC Level 2 Extended Qualification, which is equivalent to a Level 3 qualification within the Malta Qualification Framework (MQF). In 2014, a homegrown qualification was

piloted in eight state and non-state secondary schools, and in 2015 the project was run on a national level. The MATSEC Board agreed to manage and operate the assessment of vocational subjects, to give these subjects a parity of esteem as other academic SEC subjects. New syllabi were issued, emulating the same procedures endorsed by MATSEC for all other subjects (Bartolo, 2015). To overcome early school leavers, minimise the rate of absenteeism from schools, and provide an opportunity for learning for all, the Ministry for Education and Employment launched the 'My Journey: achieving through different paths' policy. This reform brought with it changes in the syllabi, where all syllabi consist of three different MQF levels with no dead-ends; and introduced another path for students who struggle to learn through theory. The applied subjects offer students the possibility to learn through practice and half of the assessment is in the form of practical application criteria (Cedefop, 2020). There is a lack of literature on the impact on students and the industry of vocational and applied subjects. Applied subjects do not have any literatures to back their impact, since their introduction was in the scholastic year 2019-2020 - the year when schools were shut down in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2 Vocational Education in European Countries

Most developed nations are characterized by a school framework that proposes both general and vocational paths. The General path is often scholastically oriented, where education gives information and aptitudes are required for further higher education. These sort of aptitudes are characterized by a high degree of sweeping statements and are aimed at improving the common cognitive abilities of youths, so as to empower work in a broader extent of assignments and occupational fields. Vocational education on the other hand, prepares youths with practice-oriented information and skills required by various occupations (Hanushek et al., 2017).

There are 29 countries within the European Union (excluding the United Kingdom) that offer vocational education and training, each with their own national strategy (CEDEFOP, 2019). According to the European Commission, "Vocational education and training (VET) provides learners with skills for personal development and active citizenship". Vocational education and training is a broad term, generally defined at the European level as preparing students for employment on a manual or practical basis, typically non-academic and entirely related to a particular profession,

occupation, or occupation (European Agency for special needs and inclusive education, 2012). According to Eichhorst et al. (2012), VET is categorized into three systems:

i. *The School-Based Vocational Education and Training:* Countries such as France, Italy, Spain, and a few eastern European countries have implemented a school-based vocational education and training framework that requires a standardized curriculum that incorporates general and occupational knowledge. In some instances, vocational and training specialization is provided as an alternative to an academically oriented track along the compulsory education path; in other cases, vocational and training may be chosen as one of a variety of post-compulsory education opportunities (Zimmerman et al., 2013). In several countries, the vocational alternative is used as a safety net for students who have low academic results and are on the brink of dropping out, as well as students who are less interested in education. More technically, driven youngsters are required to continue studying and stay in school longer because of the strong relation with work activities and hands-on practical knowledge (Eichhorst, 2015).

ii. *Formal Apprenticeships*: In other nations, vocational education and employment are delivered using the second system, which includes standardized apprenticeships in addition to on-the-job training. This apprenticeship scheme focuses on firm-level training and operates outside of the traditional education system. Australia and the United Kingdom are examples of this strategy.

iii. *Dual Vocational Training System:* Just a few countries use the last method - Dual Vocational Training: Austria, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, and Switzerland. Since it incorporates technical schooling with formal on-the-job instruction, concurrent vocational education and training have many social and human benefits. To guarantee that skills are transferable through businesses following graduating from apprenticeships, the training must also provide enough general education.

In Iceland, which is a country with a similar population to Malta, VET is offered at the upper secondary level, combining studies at schools and workplace training. The study programmes vary in length from one to four years (CEDEFOP, 2019). Austria

is a leading country in vocational education and training, and in fact, VET ranks high, and students are highly attracted to VET paths, with 70% of each year cohort opting to study a vocational area at the end of compulsory education. Vocational Education is offered at the age of fifteen years, where students have dual-track training, meaning school-based and apprenticeship (CEDEFOP, 2019). Taking Italy as another southern European country, the VET system is characterised by multi-level governance, with an extensive contribution of national, regional, and local stakeholders. At the age of fourteen, students choose whether to study general education or VET, but they must remain within the education system up to the age of eighteen years. VET is offered at different levels and they offer apprenticeships at all levels.

One could notice that in Northern Europe, VET is given high importance and is considered as a high-rank study area, whilst in the southern area of Europe, VET is still considered as a second-class study area.

2.3 Theorems for Vocational Education and Training

Dr. Charles Prosser (1949) gives sixteen theorems for successful, effective, and efficient vocational programmes. These principles remain valid to date and are an important reference to consider during the planning, implementation, and evaluation of any vocational programme. The first theorem emphasises the importance of having space, equipment, materials, and supplies to replicate what is found in the industry (Prosser & Quigley, 1949). This theorem is already abided to within the hospitality workshops within compulsory schooling in Malta, after in 2019, a simulator of an industrial kitchen, a restaurant, a hotel room, and a reception area were installed in all state schools offering the subject (Jacobsen, 2019).

The second theorem discusses the importance of having trained teachers and instructors who are knowledgeable in using the equipment, possessing the required skills and basic practices that industrial employers would expect. This is also emphasised in the seventh theorem which states that the industry's expectations and lecturers should meet. The importance of teaching soft skills through vocational subjects is accentuated in the third theorem. Currently, soft skills are preferred to technical skills and academic expertise (Singh, et al., 2013).

Prosser emphasises the importance of having individualised instruction, and effective guidance when teaching a vocational subject. These are emphasised in theorems four and thirteen. In 2018, all students studying hospitality in compulsory education were offered the opportunity to practice the skills, knowledge, and competencies at the place of work, where the Ministry for Education and Employment signed an agreement with several four- and five-star hotels in Malta and Gozo. The students experience the real world of work and how the operations of different departments run daily. The importance of practice skills at the place of work to meet the requirements by the industry and the employment requirements are highlighted in another two theorems of Prosser (Prosser & Quigley, 1949).

In 2016, *My Journey: Achieving through different paths* was launched. Apart from having all the required resources to teach hospitality, the *My Journey* policy allowed all students to learn differently, targeting the learning outcome so that students can achieve a Certificate up to Level 3, within the Malta Qualification Framework (Bonnici, 2016). The applied version of the subject was also introduced in 2019, where students who struggle to learn through theory, can learn through practice. This concept is highlighted in Prosser's twelfth, and thirteenth theorems, where Prosser emphasises the importance of having segregated subjects and that core subjects should be combined with vocational specialising subjects, to engage the students to their career and desire to learn.

The fifth theorem states that vocational education is not for everyone and that students should be carefully selected through effective guidance. The student's main interest and attitude must be the main priority when selecting a path. Prosser concludes the theorems with the importance of having flexible programmes that are updated frequently and according to the development of the industry. He also stresses that vocational subjects should be backed up by a good financial resource, to have desired results. Vocational education is not cheap to maintain, but it is economically rational to offer it (Prosser & Quigley, 1949).

2.4 Vocational Education Programmes

When introducing a vocational education programme, stakeholders must ensure that the programme is fit-for-purpose and suitable for students with different abilities. A good high-quality programme will leave benefits on other sectors, including the

economy and individual sectors according to the vocational specific area. An accurately performing economy requires the deployment of a wide variety of occupational skills. If the supply side of the labour market consisted exclusively of school leavers with general education, employers would face the costly task of teaching all of the lacking occupational skills themselves.

2.4.1 Key Factors

The European Agency (2014) identified twenty key factors for a successful vocational and educational programme. The key factors are illustrated in Figure 1. When designing a VET programme, a legal framework must be in place, incorporating all policies already in place into the new programme. For a programme

Figure 1: Key factors for a successful VET programme. (Adapted from European Agency, 2014)

to be successful, educational institutions should receive the required support and resources - including human and financial resources, to be able to implement the programme in the most efficient way. The consultation and planning programme should incorporate the input of all stakeholders, including educators, students, and parents, as this will enhance the commitment and motivation. The programme should target individuals with different needs and be as flexible as possible, while ensuring a high-quality assurance and valid assessment. Partnership and networking structures with the industry are important, as it leads the way for students after they finish the course, so that students will have a clear picture of what the world of work entails.

2.4.2 Vocational Pedagogy

The repertoire and flexibility in vocational pedagogy are too limited and practices used are too docile and lacklustre in most institutions (Faraday et al, 2011). Although there is evidence that vocational education has increased in efficiency, there is still room for improvement. Effective practice is dependent on several considerations - including not just the instructional techniques and skills used by teachers, but also the environment, the interactions between teachers and students, and continuous reflection to improve the practice. Learning hypotheses underpin vocational education, with experiential learning and learning patterns theories being the most often observed in class. Teachers tend to use empathy, experience, and pragmatism to make choices about how to teach. Faraday et al (2011) conclude that teaching models in vocational learning have yet to be developed, either in terms of language or concepts.

The awareness of a variety of teaching models may help teachers be more flexible and effective. Understanding different models can aid teachers in adapting to those models or combining them with others, thus expanding their teaching portfolio. Teaching models should be used to investigate topics of vocational education such as learning styles, pedagogical and curricula design, instructional resources, and information streams, and also learning experience design (Ji-Ping and Collis, 1995). Faraday et al (2011) argue that a framework for developing effective vocational teaching and learning is of huge importance which incorporates the teaching skills, teaching strategies, potentially develop a range of learners' skills and foster good relationships between teachers and learners; it also ensures that teachers are reflective on their practice.

Volmari et al, (2009), argue that frameworks to develop vocational education create challenges that must be seriously considered during the planning stages. Increased managerial roles and obligations, individualisation of learning, the importance of networking, and the extension of duties relating to quality assurance are all significant obstacles. Integrating and embedding a quality assurance philosophy into workplaces and organisations is a major challenge. As a result, the regulatory workload consumes a significant amount of time that could otherwise be spent on development and creativity. Teachers, coaches, and executives, on the other hand, should be constantly seen as successful changemakers and innovators. VET practitioners need assistance, whether in the form of pre-service and on-the-job preparation or resourcing. VET experts should specialize and work together to enhance the organization's skill profile, resulting in a diverse range of learning experiences for students. Ultimately, competence models are useful mechanisms for improving ongoing and in-service preparation; in today's fast-paced environment, skills learned through initial training are at risk of being outdated, necessitating upgrading.

2.5 The Concept of Perception

Perception is described as the way you think of something and your perception of what it is like, as well as the way you feel things in your senses of sight, hearing, and touch. This is also the innate capacity to grasp or notice new information easily. Perception is described as the process of being conscious of or interpreting sensory input in philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science. According to Huffman et al (1997), perception comprises of three key processes:

i.   Selection: This is the initial stage in the process where a person filters information to choose the most essential aspects for one's perception. This process depends on preferences, desires, and previous experience.

ii. Organisation: selected information gathered from the initial stage of the process is structured into patterns or principles. Usually, information is grouped according to similar things or patterns. This process includes perception type, constancies, and dept.

iii. Interpretation: the final stage of the process of perception involves the selected and organised information to be processed by the brain, to provide explanations and make conclusions about concepts being discussed.

One must consider the two foundational aspects of experience: physical and psychological, to elucidate how we establish form, stability, and interpretations for the identified stimuli, i.e., how perception happens. These two dimensions are responsible for the perceptual outcomes as they work together. Perception's physical component is mostly concerned with the translation of a signal into a functional shape, and it plays a role in people's acquisition of awareness of the environment around them. It encompasses the energy effects of stimuli, the nature and roles of human sensory organs, as well as the transfer of stimuli from nervous systems to brains. On the other hand, people's views, ideas, attitudes, desires, and interests, among other factors, have a much stronger effect on how they view the outside world. People offer interpretations of selected stimuli during this process, and as a result, they have their special interpretations of different aspects of life. This is the physiological experience. As a result, rather than their sensory organs (the physical dimension) deciding what stimuli will attract people's attention and thus receive meanings, it is their beliefs, behaviours, or intentions (the psychological dimension) that decide what stimuli will attract people's attention and thus receive meanings (Qiong, 2017).

2.5 Perception of Vocational Education

The European Quality Assurance for Vocational Education and Training (ECAVET), together with the European Commission and VET providers had been trying to address the issue of skills shortages with the European member states for a good number of years. The Austrian Council for Education Research stated that Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) programmes attract more low-achieving students - those residing in rural areas, those attending government schools, and students whose parents did not reach tertiary education level (Barnet & Ryan, 2005). Students from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to take such programs as they are less likely to attend university (Polesel et al., 2003). This might also be the case for Malta, even since when the Applied subjects were introduced, several low-achieving students had applied to study such subjects, having 613 students or 27.5% studying applied subjects in the scholastic year 2019-2020 (MEDE, 2020). However, no studies are available for the local context since the introduction of the vocational and applied subject is relatively recent.

2.5.1 Student's Perception

Students are one of the key stakeholders when researching vocational education. Their perception, together with their main target on why they should take the vocational route, is imperative. Literature shows that students themselves still believe that the vocational route is for those of low socio-economic backgrounds and for students who do not manage to achieve enough grades to enter a university. McGarey (2002) inspected the relationship between students' components (i.e., sexual orientation, race, scholarly execution, career mindfulness, and social financial variables) and the recognition of secondary students concerning vocational education within the State of Florida. McGarey (2002) characterized vocation education as skills preparing, industrial arts, and specialized education. Skills preparing was alluded to as a shape of instruction, in which teach or drill is utilized to teach to form the learner as fit, qualified or capable in a given aptitude and concurring to McGarey (2002), its unique reason was: to keep boys in school; create leisure –time intrigued and give professional abilities. From all this, McGarey's (2002) conceptualization of vocational education stresses the element of practical education meant to create skills relevant for use by the trainee.

Research by Atkins and Flint (2015) studies the perception of youths' perception on vocational education in England, where it was evident that the English education system keeps on failing to address the issue of parity of esteem amongst VET and academic subjects. This study concludes that students invest in their vocational studies believing that after they achieve the qualification, it will be readily exchangeable in the labour and higher education market. However, students acknowledged that vocational studies do not carry the same level of esteem.

The impact of social class positioning in terms of educational and occupational life chances was also highlighted. Atkins and Flint highlight the outcome of students' perception that when they study a vocational programme, they see it as a 'job for life' rather than the concept of 'climbing up the ladder. The study also identifies that youths from cultural or ethnic minority groups were more likely to take vocational courses which are more practical and from the service sector, such as Health and Social Care or Food Preparation courses. Another outcome of the study shows that despite students' optimism and commitment to the vocational programmes and the promises of policy rhetoric, the demoted students remain unequally positioned within

the educational system, which unequally prepares them for forms of labour in a job market, whilst those from the more elite social class will have access to the best jobs (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Participants within this study stated that VET programmes are still valued as low by society when compared to traditional academic programmes. Students feel that the skills obtained in VET programmes are not valued by the public, but simply see them as studying for a job rather than a career.

Another study in Kampala, Uganda states that despite the effort by the government to popularise vocational education, students are shunning VET in preference to general academic programmes. Kizza et al (2019) study the perception of secondary school students towards VET in secondary schools. Based on the theory of constructivism, the study's objectives were to establish the perception of students and to establish the channels through which students can access vocational education information. The perceptions of students hold on vocational education have a great influence on the demand for vocational education and training, meaning that if students think that such programmes are for low status, vulnerable groups, then the demand for VET will be low. This could be in conjunction with the influence of the students' families, job market needs, and government policies (Kizza et al, 2019).

There is a general apathy towards VET among secondary school pupils, even though students do not perceive significant distinctions between VET and general education in terms of further training opportunities, job opportunities, and status. This was evident when they were asked whether they preferred to enter the HSC or polytechnics after senior 4, and 83 percent selected the Advanced level. Students believe that VET programs are just as beneficial as general education programs for students preparing to enter university education. Surprisingly, they prefer a general academic program (HSC) to a polytechnic program that is more vocationally oriented. This finding is consistent with Chambliss & Chiariello (1988), who stated that attracting students with an in-demand major is difficult. This, according to Chambliss and Chiariello (1988), is due to a lack of diversity in VET programs.

It is also possible that students are unsure about the quality of education provided in vocational institutes, since, as Nurbolat et al. (2016) pointed out, effective efforts to encourage VET must be accompanied by improvements in quality. According to the

results of the research, VET programs provide ample opportunities for work experience. Both children from well-to-do families and those from deserving families should benefit from these programs. The programs are non-discriminatory for talented and poor students, and they deserve to be taught in both general (academic) and vocational institutes, as evidenced by the fact that they are sponsored by the government (Oketch, 2014). The question that arises is why students are still biased in favour of VET. As the results show, this could be attributed to the low value the community places on VET. Triventi (2013), Clarke, and Winch (2007) for example, attribute the high preference for VET programs in Germany to their association with high status, ability to provide a link with higher education, and the ability to provide a link with the labour market. Students also disagreed with the idea that students who attend higher education earn more than those who attend VET, meaning that, in their minds, a person's earning potential is determined not by whether he or she has attended higher education or VET, but rather by whether the education he or she has received has equipped him or her with the requisite skills expected in the job market. Swift & Fisher (2012) found that the general perception of VET among students is that it inhibits future career and education decisions, which supports the students' preference for higher education over vocational education.

2.5.2 Educator's Perception

There is a very broad gap in literature on what educators think about VET. In fact, the literature available is more on how educators play an important role in vocational education and what type of challenges they face in vocational institutions. The introduction of vocational subjects in secondary schools is debatable. Some think that it is important for the economy of the country, while others think that instilling skills in students at a young age is beneficial to the education system, social status, employability, and equity (Wallenborn & Heyneman, 2009). Introducing school-based vocational education can lead to operational difficulties. The country should invest in teacher training, as this is the fundamental resource to provide a VET programme of high quality. However, resources such as workshops should also be an important consideration when introducing this system. Wallenborn & Heyneman (2009) argue that curricula should remain stable and relate to the skills and competencies required by the industry. Teachers and school administrators may not

necessarily be the right experts for preparing young people for the workplace, and a formal conversation between schools and entrepreneurs may be lacking.

Educators tend to base their perception on whether a programme is valid or not, on assessment. While teachers can be poorly qualified to use agreed evaluation practices, Schaefer and Lissitz (1987) concluded that assessment is an important part of their professional position and that they have a positive attitude toward it. Teachers in secondary vocational education did not approve or deny that their evaluation practices were restricted. The effects of this report corroborate with previous research on evaluation limitations, where it is evident that teachers argue about the "restricted time for preparation". Teachers in secondary higher training could be less motivated to use data if they do not have enough time to solve evaluation quality issues (Gordon, 1998).

Jung (2020) looked at teachers' perspectives on vocational education and work-based learning, which is a crucial factor to consider when providing vocational education at all levels. Teachers agree that business exposure or work-based learning (WBL) is critical in training students for further schooling and careers, according to the report. Teachers, on the other hand, said that WBL is incredibly difficult to enforce and monitor. Teachers must set aside days to network and communicate with businesses, which causes resentment, because they do not have time during school hours to do so.

2.5.3 General Public Perception

A study conducted by the Eurobarometer by the European Commission in 2011 affirms that nearly three-quarters of European citizens believe vocational education and training have a positive reputation in their region. However, approximately one-fourth of respondents believe the VET has a negative reputation in their region. Many of the indicators in this study indicate that VET teaches skills that employers expect and that it provides high-quality learning. However, in some circumstances, there is a lack of trust in VET as a source of high-quality education. Among other contexts, some socio-demographic segments lack trust in VET. People who see themselves on the lower part of the social ladder, for example, have little faith that VET would boost their career chances, contrary to someone who sees oneself higher up the ladder. While one of the EU's key goals is to provide the opportunity to

vulnerable groups, these findings suggest that these groups with the lowest expectations in general, have the least confidence in vocational training's potential to transform and enhance their circumstances.

2.5.4 Perspectives of the labour market concerning the need for VET institutions.

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is commonly acknowledged as an efficient way to provide training that is of direct significance to the labour market. It allows the transition between learning and works for young people. VET allows the opportunity for students to learn through apprenticeships and provides broader pathways of learning. VET also allows embedding of the formal education system and could reach out to various target groups, including adult workers (Cedefop, 2019). A study conducted in India in 2019 by Dixit and Mawroh shows that the Indian workforce in the tourism and hospitality industry is experiencing a critical shortage of qualified and skilled workforce. Only 2.3% of the workforce has undergone some sort of skills training. The government launched the *Skill India* initiative, whereby in 2022, a minimum of 300 million people shall be trained in the hospitality field.

The UK jobs sector highlights many differences in knowing what could fairly be expected of advanced modern apprentices and the perceived reality of these individuals' expertise, skills, and comprehension. The UK Employment, Lifelong Learning, and International Directorate noted that the lack of social skills and employability skills, such as enthusiasm, determination, efficiency, and a willingness to learn and collaborate with others, is the most challenging problem that the industry is facing (Saunders et al, 2007). Another study in Romania shows the need to link the skills offered within higher education institutions to the requirements of the employers from the tourism and hospitality industry (Lupu et al., 2014). As expected in the hypotheses of this research, the perception of the hoteliers on the most important attribute to have when aspiring to work within the hospitality industry is the attitude, followed by theoretical and practical training, and appearance. The hoteliers emphasize the need for more practical training and more real-life situations within the courses that prepare students to work within the hospitality industry. This could be relevant to the finding of this research, as the programme offered within secondary schools is very limited when it comes to the practical component (Lupu et al., 2014).

Inbound visitors in
2013
1,590,991

Difference of
+1,180,897

Inbound visitors in
2019
2,771,888
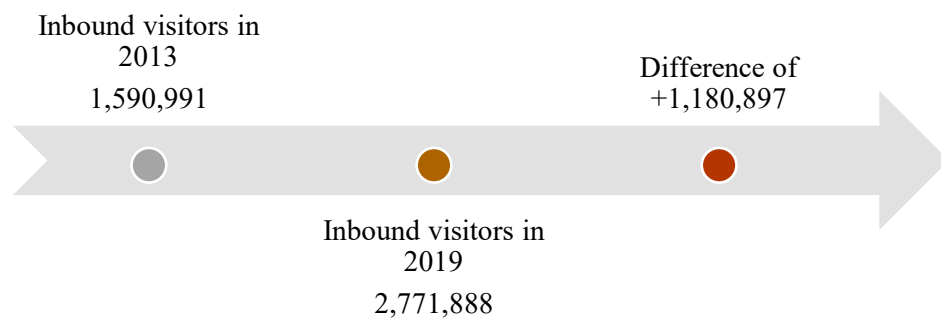
Figure 2: Inbound visitors in Malta (MTA, 2019)

The Hospitality Industry is a sector that has seen significant growth worldwide in the past 25 years (Johanson et al. 2011). This brought the need for more training by different institutions to supply future employees for this demand. However, taking the case of Malta, where tourism had a boost of over 1 million inbound visitors from 2013 to 2019, as seen in Figure 2 (MTA, 2019), the number of graduates is still considered very low, and young people that opt for a career in the industry is still not popular. This could be due to the lack of conditions present in the hospitality industry. Ehnert, (2009) states that the key components for sustainable employability are:

- recruiting and retaining top talent.
- ensuring the health and welfare of employees.
- Long-term investment in workforce capabilities through the development of key competencies and lifelong learning.
- promoting work-life and work-family harmony among employees.
- creating employee trust, employee trustworthiness, and long-term job relationships.
- handling aging workforces.

Furthermore, the inability of the hospitality industry to provide long-term job options to employees at all levels has a significant negative impact on the sector's image, which influences the decisions made by those accessing both schoolings after high school and seeking employment after graduation. Most hospitality management programs require considerably lower entrance rates than general business degrees in countries like the United Kingdom, and hospitality management programs are

usually provided by lower-ranked universities (The Complete University Guide, 2018).

Although it is known that many promising young people enter the industry and some go on to have good careers in hospitality, some leave after a brief period, implying significant graduate retention problems in the industry (Brown et al., 2014; Nachmias and Walmsley, 2015). It is also known that the hospitality sector is highly complex, making broad generalizations regarding the workplace climate and development prospects impossible. There is a pressing need to reconsider the options open to graduates who choose to work in the hospitality industry, including the role of bespoke (and, in many cases, second-class) management degrees (Baum, 2019). It is also true that, for the hospitality industry to hire from the most skilled pool in the graduate hospitality industry labour force, all large and small companies must experience major cultural and organizational reform (Baum, 2019).

2.6 Conclusion

The literature discussed highlighted the history of vocational education in Malta and gave an overview of the vocational programmes offered in some of the European countries. The philosophical understanding of how a person builds his perception was debated. The perceptions of different stakeholders on vocational education were examined - including perceptions of students, educators, the general public, and the labour market. Notably, however, there is a lack of study that shows the perception of local vocational programmes and no literature on vocational education within obligatory education in Malta. This gap is of utmost importance, as programme setters, including qualification bodies and personnel from the curriculum department within the Ministry for Education, require such data to improve the programme currently offered. This gap in literature provides the researcher with the possibility for empirical research and addresses the requirements for secondary and post-secondary institutions, as well as that of the industry.

Chapter 3: Research Method

3.1 Introduction

For this study, the researcher opted for a Qualitative Narrative Inquiry methodology. Attributes to the work of professors D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly define narrative inquiry as a way of understanding experience. It is a mutual collaboration between the researcher and the participants. It focuses on the individual and perceptions expressed through narration (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Their work is strongly influenced by John Dewey, as experience is both social and personal for the individual and it pertains to continuity. Moreover, given that there is no consensus on how narrative inquiry is carried out, the researcher adopts Clandinin and Connelley's method, that of exploring the personal, social and temporal experience in each narrative. In addition, Riessman (2008), stresses that this method contributes and makes the researcher part of the research herself. This ensures rich detail and guarantees that the focus is solely on the experience itself. In addition, the term 'inquiry' stresses that the stories narrated are written for research purposes, thus shifting from the retelling of the experience only. Moreover, Polkinghorne (1998) distinguishes Narrative Analysis and Analysis of Narrative stories from the narrative. He stresses that story is the outcome of events, while a narrative goes deeper and focuses on influences and processes that shape the story.

Narrative research adopts an interpretivist paradigm and acknowledges that knowledge is relative, dynamic, and evolving in nature (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013; Patton, 2015). The participants themselves lead storied lives based on their experience and the researcher collects, describes these experiences, and tells new stories of them (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Riessman (2008), cautions readers and stresses that narrative inquiry cannot be defined trivially. Though in contemporary usage, the narrative has come to mean writing beyond few bullet points, the author stresses that storytelling has effects in social interaction that other modes of communication do not. Furthermore, narrative storytelling encourages actions and if necessary, change; thus making narrative inquiry strategic, functional and purposeful.

3.2 Framework for the Research

Depending on the philosophical beliefs, a researcher decides either to the position of distance or recognized participation in the research (Birks and Mills, 2018). The type of philosophies that researchers pertain will often lead to adopting a strong quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approach (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Before conducting this research project, the researcher had to reflect thoroughly on her philosophical worldview. Epistemologically, the researcher is already equipped with knowledge, truth, experiences, and beliefs, that although largely hidden in research, still affect the practice of the study (Birks and Mills, 2018). Assumptions differ from one researcher to another and their supposition is highly important, as the researcher aims to produce further knowledge and to suggest changes stemming from the research. The beliefs and knowledge acquired by any researcher throughout the years shape up the decisions on the methodology, methods, and tools being used throughout the entire research project (Corbin and Strauss, 2015).

Figure 3 shows the relationship of worldviews, design, and research methods delineating the framework for research. The researcher ontologically clings to assumptions that automatically put her on the lines of narrative inquiry methodology. The methodology tries to understand experience through storytelling. By adopting transformative viewpoints and concepts out of the interview with participants, the researcher constructs suggestions to encourage change. Due to the nature of the research, the researcher distanced herself from a postpositivist quantitative and
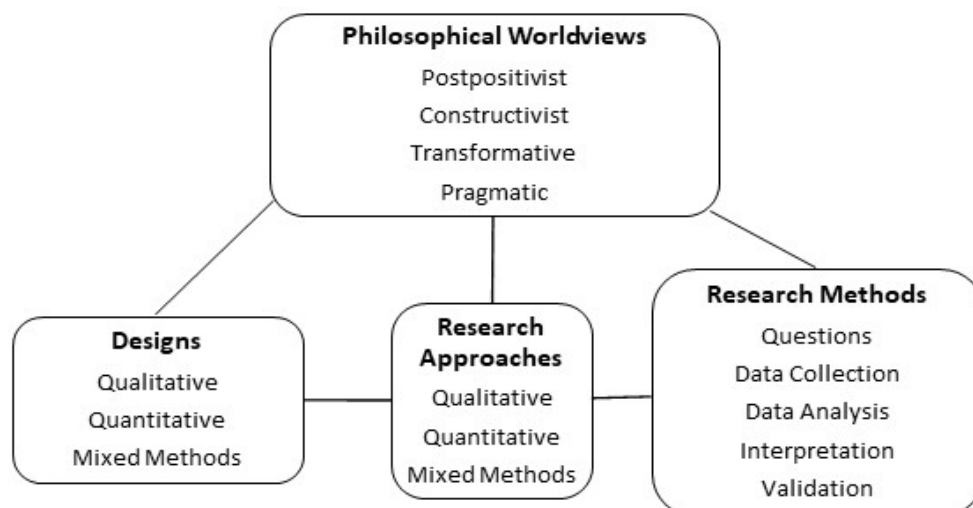
Figure 3: The relationship of philosophical worldviews and methodology (Source: Creswell and Creswell, 2018)

pragmatic mixed methods methodologies and adopted an interpretivist transformative worldview. The purpose of the research is to make meaning of the narratives to transform professionally. The steps to be taken by a researcher to conduct this research can be supported with the aid of the 'Research Onion' diagram shown in Figure 4. The research onion as explained by Saunders et al., (2007) exemplifies the phases that must be followed when developing a research strategy. The set of beliefs concerning the nature of the reality being investigated is known as the research philosophy (Bryman, 2012). This study opts for a qualitative narrative
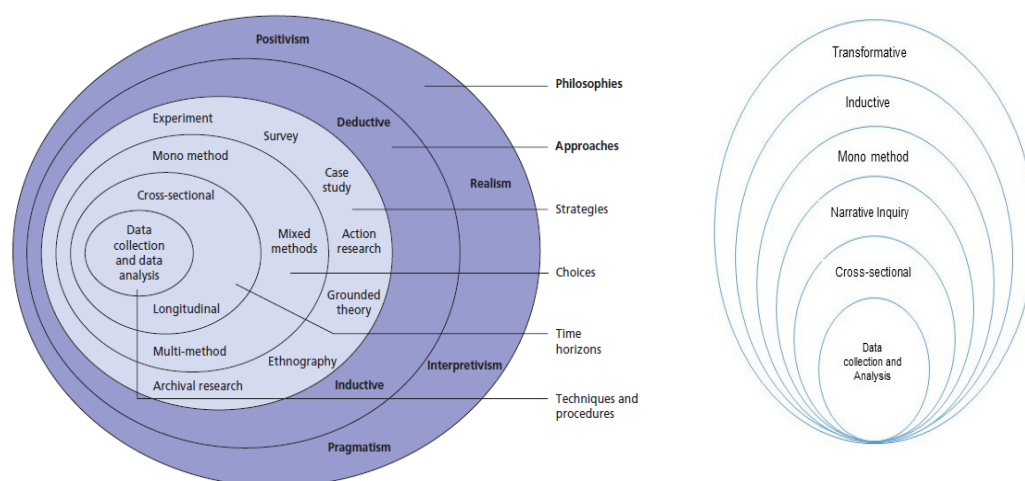
Figure 4: The research onion (Source: Saunders et al., 2016)

inquiry methodology. Qualitative narrative research is an inquiry process of understanding human experiences based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problems (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018).

Moreover, this research will focus on narrative qualitative inquiry. The narrative inquiry aims to investigate and theorize human experience as it is characterized in textual form. The aim is for an in-depth discovery of the significant people appoint to their experiences, narrative researchers work with small samples of participants to find rich and free-ranging discussion (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Usually, at the end of the research, the narrative merges the views of participants with those of the researcher's interest in a collaborative narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This study opts for a thematic narrative analysis, where the perceptions and experiences of different groups of people who are in some way making use of the VET programme in hospitality, will be grouped into themes and later compared.

3.3 Population and Sample

The population size for this research is eighteen personnel from three different sectors, however, more people were approached to participate in this study to ascertain that a minimum of eighteen persons participated. Twenty-eight people were approached to participate to ensure that the focus groups consist of a minimum of six people each. The sectors include educators teaching in secondary schools, staff and management at post-secondary institutions focusing on tourism studies, and management personnel from the hospitality industry - which may include HR managers, general managers, executive chefs, and executive housekeepers. The targeted participants for this research study were selected randomly, voluntarily, and contacted by email individually, explaining the research purpose. The criteria for including/ excluding the participants are illustrated in Tables 1, 2, and 3 below.

Table 1: Criteria for teachers' selection

Criteria for teachers' selection
A teacher must be teaching in a state or non-state school within Malta secondary schools
A teacher must be teaching the subject of Hospitality in one of the secondary schools
A teacher must have been trained to teach the subject of Hospitality
A teacher must have been teaching the subject for at least one scholastic year

Table 2: Criteria for selecting staff and management at ITS

Criteria for selecting staff and management at ITS
Staff could be lecturers or management personnel, ideally from the curriculum area
Staff must have been working at ITS for at least one scholastic year
Management must have participated in one of the MATSEC syllabus panels or had direct input in implementing the VET Hospitality syllabi
Staff shall have acted as external verifiers for the subject of Hospitality within secondary schools or have undergone Hospitality training offered by the Institute for Education or Ministry for Education

Table 3: Criteria for selecting personnel from the hospitality industry

Criteria for selecting personnel from the hospitality industry
The staff is somehow informed about the subject of Hospitality being offered within secondary schools
The participant shall be in any management position
The participant must have been working within the hospitality industry for at least one year

The researcher conducted three sets of focus groups with educators teaching Hospitality in secondary education, with academic staff at the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS), and with personnel in HR and general management within local hospitality businesses. This way, the researcher could understand the similarities and differences in perceptions from different sectors towards the introduction of vocational subjects, with a special focus on Hospitality. Each focus group was made up of six participants, selected randomly and being invited to participate voluntarily. The personnel from secondary schools comprised of Heads of Department and teachers teaching the subject, personnel from post-secondary institutions including academic management personnel, lecturers, and if possible, the Director of Studies or CEO. Personnel from the industry involved HR managers and/or general managers of hotels, restaurants and/or other businesses within the industry. Other interviews were conducted with the same person within focus groups who showed interest in elaborating more on an area discussed during the focus groups.

3.4 Data analysis

3.4.1 The Analysis Process

The thematic narrative analysis aims to look for parallel and similar concepts that emerge during the analysis process. For data analysis, Cresswell, and Cresswell (2018), suggest qualitative computer software programmes, as hand coding is laborious and time-consuming. The researcher used the MAXQDA software programme. This software helps the researcher to make reasonable evaluations out of the narratives. The software can work with multiple research tools and all data is stored in one project pack. Moreover, when using MAXQDA, the researcher can develop an audit trail and can aid in producing important themes to check for parallel

and similar concepts emerging. It also allows the researcher to produce attractive visualisations of the results. Each focus group conducted was transcribed and analyzed before more focus groups were undertaken. Insights from the interviews were grouped into themes, solely for each interview. As opposed to other methodologies and analysis techniques, the narrative is not fragmented and coded but kept intact (Birks and Mills, 2018; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Lengthy segments are used to emanate common themes from the narratives transcribed. Moreover, the researcher's experience and reflexive thoughts ensure a collaborative process throughout all the research process (Riesmann, 2008). The continuous comparative analysis method permits the researcher to compare one focus group with the other, thus emerging themes can be compared for any similarities and liminality. The researcher realized the importance that after each analysed focus group (narrative), she undergoes writing reflexive notes, to ensure that the 'data gathering' and the 'analysis' process becomes one harmonious one. This is supported by Gehart et al, (2007) who claim that the analysis process in narrative inquiry happens across all the research processes. It is not only an activity that happens only after the data ollection step, but it starts from the literature review phase. The researcher adopted Gehart et al's mindset and represents the analysis process as shown in Figure 5.
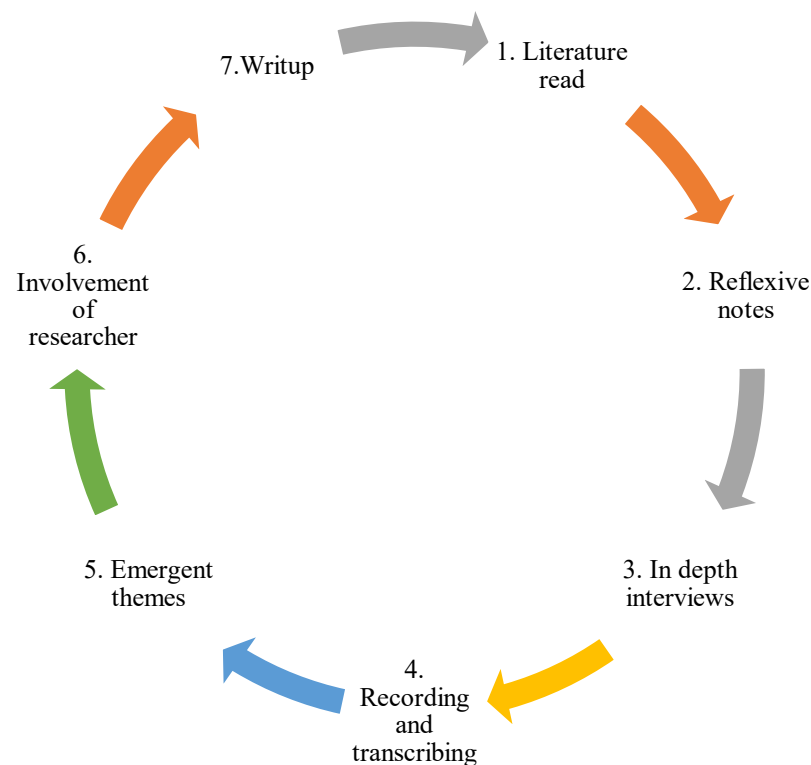
Figure 5: Analysis Process

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Each participant was informed by a covering letter through an email, which included an invitation for them to participate in the research. The objectives of the research were highlighted in the covering letter and each participant signed this consent form. The conditions for confidentiality and anonymity were explained again to each participant and participants were guaranteed that all the appropriate measures were taken not to reveal and participant identities. Moreover, the researcher adhered to the number of ethical principles split below into four main criteria.

3.5.1 Not Harming Participants

Any disclosure of information shared by the participants could harm them and break a fundamental code of ethics. The information shared was solely used for research purposes. Any suggestions offered by the industry representatives were related to the study only. Furthermore, the researcher was not testing the professionalism of the educators, post-secondary institution personnel, and industry representatives. The researcher was only interested in the perceptions revealed by the participants. These perceptions were representative as themes to be compared against each other, to explain the research findings. Moreover, the researcher made sure that the participants were not pressured with the questions asked. This ensured rich narratives, which in turn ensured quality in the research findings. The researcher made sure that the directed questions were not testing the participants' professionalism or making them feel at a disadvantage. The researcher understood her power and was able to level herself with the participants. She asked questions to empower the participants and build mutual trust (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Finally, this research was in no way aimed to cause any business harm, especially to the industry representatives. On the contrary, it was ideal to understand the perceptions on hospitality as a vocational subject in compulsory education.

3.5.2. Informed Consent

The participants accepted to be interviewed and freely gave their consent without any pressure from the researcher. They were well notified by the researcher about the research and that the focus groups were to be conducted by the researcher herself. The interviewees were all reminded that at any point in time during the interview, they could withdraw their participation. Participants were informed that the focus groups were to be audio recorded solely for proof and analysis purposes. Finally,

participants were to be ensured that any form of publication of this research did not directly or indirectly lead to breaches of agreed ethical considerations. Considering the current pandemic, the focus groups were all carried out digitally through the Microsoft Teams platform.

3.5.3. Anonymity

Once the participants were selected and consent forms signed, the researcher ensured that the participants were anonymous. During the transcribing process of the narratives, the participants were given numbers instead of their names. The researcher abided by the moral and professional obligation not to reveal individuals and most important not to ever use data gathered against the participants.

3.5.4. Confidentiality

The participants were informed that any information given during the focus groups was considered strictly confidential. Any access to this data was to be solely constrained to the researcher and the mentor. Confidentiality was taken seriously by the researcher as any data gathered revealed by the participants might put them at risk or threaten their work positions. All interviews within the focus groups and transcriptions were password protected and were not shared - not even with the participants themselves, since focus group interviews will not be individually but as a group. An ethical consideration application form was submitted for approval and the researcher proceeded only with the research after approval.

3.6 Problems and Limitations

The main limitation within this study is that there is no preliminary literature about the introduction of vocational and applied subjects in secondary schools in Malta, and thus, the researcher will have to gather information from primary sources. Comparing the programme to other countries could also be challenging since Malta is the only country within the European Union that offers vocational education and training in compulsory education at the age of fourteen years and is incorporated within mainstream education.

Focus groups, despite all the pros, can cause some limitations. Being in groups of six people (minimum) could result in a lack of direct participation by some. The researcher is planning to conduct the focus group sessions online due to the COVID-19 situation and its restrictive measures; and this might create a limitation in not

having the feel of what people are discussing. Every person could be biased on the subject due to several reasons (Gaille, 2015). The fact that the researcher is the person in charge of the subject within the Ministry for Education could cause a sense of insecurity between the people within the focus groups, as they could feel uncomfortable criticising a programme that the researcher had direct input in implementing. The researcher must ensure that everything said within the focus groups is for this study and should not interfere with other work-related issues. This will be ensured by explaining to the participants that anything discussed within the focus group shall be interpreted for the sole aim of this research.

The participants are left free to join online the focus group in a given time and date. This might also create a problem for the study if some of the participants withdraw at the last minute and/or without notifying the researcher. In this case, the number of participants will change from that targeted in the sample size and population.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the epistemology, philosophy, and methodology pertained by the researcher. It also encompassed the analysis process that starts from the literature read, to the communication of findings. This makes the researcher a continuous collaborator with the research process. In the final part, ethical considerations were highlighted and pointed out to ensure an ethically sound research study.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

This chapter focuses on the presentation of findings through focus groups as the main research tool used for the collection of data. The three focus groups conducted for the narrative analysis of the findings were made up of an average of six participants from each sector. In this study, all participants are kept anonymous and referred to as participants, followed by a number allocated to each individual. Participants numbered 1 to 5 are educators, participants numbered 6 to 11 are post-secondary institutions' personnel and participants 12 to 16 are industry representatives. The participants in each focus group were specifically selected to have an overview of the perception of the introduction of Hospitality as a VET subject, as illustrated in Figure 6. The researcher opted to use MAXQDA software to develop the common concepts and views. The three focus groups were transcribed and themed, and for each focus group and theme, a constant comparative analysis was applied within the narrative enquire technique. This ensured that the themes, concepts, and categories were compared between each focus group.

Focus Group 1: Hospitality Educators in Secondary Schools	• Eight people invited, accepted the invitation six, one was absent. • Educators coming from the state and non-state secotors (church schools and independent schools). • Educators' experience varies from student teachers, 3-12 years teaching experience, Head of Department.
Focus Group 2: Personnel working at a post-secondary institution focusing on Tourism Studeies	• Six people were invited, all accepted the invitation and attended. • Having a mixture of personnel including educators, co-ordinators, career guidance, directors, and curriculum management.
Focus Group 3: Personnel working in the Hospitality Industry	• Eight people invited, six accepted the invitation, five attended. • Personnel carrying roles of general managers in Hotels, Human Resources managers, training co-ordinators, restaurant/ catering executives, and Events managers.

Figure 6: Focus Groups and their participants

4.1 Focus group with Hospitality Educators in Maltese Secondary schools

4.1.1 The educators' experience in teaching the subject

The teaching experience is one of the major influences on the perception of the introduction of the subject. This is because in the researcher's opinion, the experience will determine the opinion of the educator on the subject and the system currently being followed. The experience is different for all participants since they teach in different environments and sectors, despite that they all teach in secondary schools.

One of the key elements that were noticed from the experience of educators is the issue of input in decision-making and the working tools they have to teach the subject, mainly the syllabi. The educators commented that the new syllabus is more helpful and guided for educators, apart from being fairer on students when assessing.

Participant 1:

> *"The new assessment syllabus is more helpful and gives more guidance to the teachers to assess. It is also fairer for students. The fact that the subject is newly introduced and had input from teachers when implementing certain changes was also a good experience, as we ensured that the subject is linking to the world of work, and students are given the right opportunities for their careers"*

Participant 4:

> *"The mode of assessment is quite good and of good quality and valid; however, I believe that more focus should be placed on the skills of students when doing their assessment. It is a pity that students who work very hard to present a good level of assignment as requested in the assignment brief, and then no marks are allocated for the presentation of work, but on the other side, they have deducted all assignment marks if the work is not presented in the format requested. Assessment should be seen as a holistic*

approach and not only on how much the student knows the subject. These will still help the student in the future"

Another important issue that was brought up was the issue of teacher training within the teaching experience and the challenges that educators face to be compatible to teach the vocational subject. One has to point out that the majority of educators teaching Hospitality in secondary schools in Malta are qualified teachers in a related area, such as Home Economics. This means that the educators had to sit for 'initial training' to be compatible to teach the subject with new topics and to familiarise oneself with the new assessment system, which was introduced through the learning outcomes framework and the MyJourney policy within the Maltese education system.

Participant 2:

> *"Nowadays I feel much more confident in teaching the subject, as I got trained yearly. Having said this, this is a challenge as let's face it, it is one thing getting trained for three days in a year rather than having a degree in a subject. I feel the need for more training, as honestly if I had the industrial resources to use during the lesson, I get panicked as I never had the experience to use them or even work within the industry"*

Participant 3:

> *"There are some topics within the syllabus that I am not familiar with and I feel that if we are not constantly trained, and we seek individual training, teachers struggle to teach such a vast subject"*

Participant 4:

> *"The fact that we were given a toolkit to start with from the department was very helpful, but I could see a huge difference when studying to become a Hospitality teacher and having lectures with lecturers who are professional in their field as they could give you the best knowledge, skills, and competencies which will make it easier for you as a teacher when teaching the subject. I feel that I have an advantage over my colleagues who did not study for the*

full teaching degree. I also believe that having worked in the industry before is another asset when teaching the subject as if you never worked in a hotel or restaurant, the chances are that operational-wise, you do not know how things work"

Participant 1:

"I strongly believe that it is the individual who must decide whether s/he wants to get more training in using equipment, resources or in specific areas, and one should be responsible that if s/he is teaching the subject, this is done correctly. Let us not expect the department to call us for training but seek self-taught training as well"

The educators feel that the experience in teaching the subject was highly improved with the link with the industry, through a partnership agreement with local hotels and businesses, with the installation of new workshops within secondary schools and resources given to work with and by having the opportunity to make learning more practical and fun. Participants feel that this link with the industry should be extended for students studying Applied Hospitality, as this is not yet available.

The introduction of the new workshops was a highly motivating initiative for educators teaching in state schools. The participants claimed that it is very important to have all the resources available to conduct the lessons, and equipment should be the same as that used in the industry and at post-secondary institutions so that students could learn in the proper way as from the very beginning. On the other hand, educators teaching in non-state schools - where the investment in physical resources was not possible due to many reasons such as financial restraints, structural issues, and limited space, feel that their students and themselves are discriminated against, as they have to teach the same subject with the same content, however without equipment and resources. The participants claimed that they have to struggle to make students imagine by giving them scenarios.

Participant 3:

> " I am talking from this perspective as I believe that state school teachers have a huge advantage with the availability of resources and financial support. We are always telling students to imagine, and using scenarios (theoretical) however, how much can a student imagine, even when considering their age and life experience."

Participant 2

> "Being a teacher in an independent school where our physical resources are not the same as state schools, is a challenge as students are not exposed to the industrial world, and as a teacher, I cannot show them how it works in the industry. having said this, however, I am grateful that at least our food lab is well equipped with domestic appliances and functionable."

4.1.2 Educators' views on the Positive and Negative aspects of the programme

The educators gave several positive and negative aspects to the holistic view of the programme. The aspects are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Positive and Negative Aspects of the Hospitality Programme in Secondary Schools

Positive Aspects	Negative Aspects
The subject is focused and specifies the industry's needs and requirements.	Teachers tend to focus more on assessment rather than subject content
Good management of the subject	Very limited time to teach the subject
Assessment is fair	The SEC syllabus is module-based and students tend to get demotivated if the module area is not of interest to them.
	External verifiers do not follow the same standards with all schools.
	Limited subject exposure to specific content and topics

The participants claimed that one of the biggest issues with the programme is that it was introduced within the mainstream education and adapting a vocational subject

like Hospitality within the system. Vocational subjects require more time than an eighty-minute lesson to teach students the process, skills, and competencies. Participants also claimed that ... "*there is a lot of theory and content to cover apart from the assessment that the time available for lessons is not enough and (we are) always struggling to manage to cover all the content. This is leading to deduct from practical lessons.*" Participant number 4 claimed that when... "*Comparing to Australia and Finland, a double lesson is of two hours, which is very fruitful for vocational subjects, as one can prepare more practice and ensure that students are learning the skills properly, and not a marathon against time.*"

The participants also agreed that the good management of the subject from the education department. Participant 3 said:

> "Something very positive supported in Hospitality is the fact that the management of the subject - including the education officer and heads of department are very helpful and I feel that our challenge is lighter than that of other VET teachers teaching other subjects, the fact that we are constantly, our queries are answered imminently and we feel that at least someone is considering our work as professional is very important"

4.1.3 Perspective on whether the subject prepared the students for the world of work

The participants discussed the fact that the subject has a lot of theory to be covered and therefore practical skills are lacking, leading to having students who are very knowledgeable in theoretical aspects, but are not fully prepared in practical skills. Participant 5 stated:

> "*I have already had a few students who have moved on to ITS. Thus, this, in itself seems to point to an answer in the affirmative. The programme seems to instill an interest in the area of Hospitality that a number have moved on to ITS. I do not know how many others (if any) have ended up working in the industry. I believe the programme gives a good taster of hotel operations and the tourism industry. I am convinced that it will be an asset for anyone who will end up working within the sector.*"

4.1.4 Mandatory training for educators and students

The participants compiled a list of courses that should be mandatory for all educators teaching the Hospitality subject and are also fruitful to be offered to students as seen in Figure 7. The first aid course and the food handling license B are to be included in the teacher training courses in institutions and universities. Participants also claimed that courses offered from local and foreign institutions are to be subsidised by the Ministry for Education as this will encourage more educators and students to enroll in different courses to enhance their skills and competencies. One of the participants suggested that ... *"a top-up course is to be mandatory for teachers to enhance skills from time to time. It should be part and parcel of the teaching load since it should be mandatory, where every Hospitality teacher will have an afternoon dedicated to training."*

| First Aid Course |
| Food Handling Licence B |
| Practical skills top-up course |
| Operations courses from ITS |
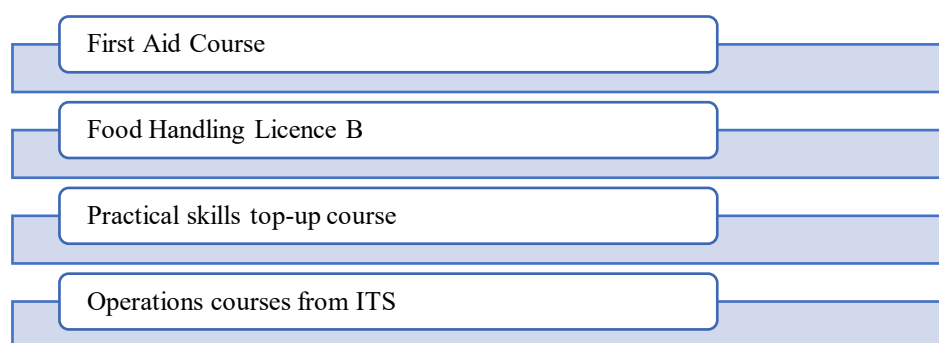
Figure 7: Mandatory courses for educators teaching Hospitality

4.1.5 Future targets in teaching and learning for the subject of Hospitality

The participants have different targets for the future, both personal and in teaching and learning. As illustrated in Figure 8, the future targets differ from further studies in the Hospitality industry, by applying for Master degree courses in different Hospitality areas, and also work with the Malta Tourism Authority and other associations to improve the hospitality exposure in the south area of the country, as resources (businesses) are very limited in this area. Participants claimed that their main target is to not only teach the subject, but to ensure that their students are well equipped with skills to continue their career journey in the hospitality industry.
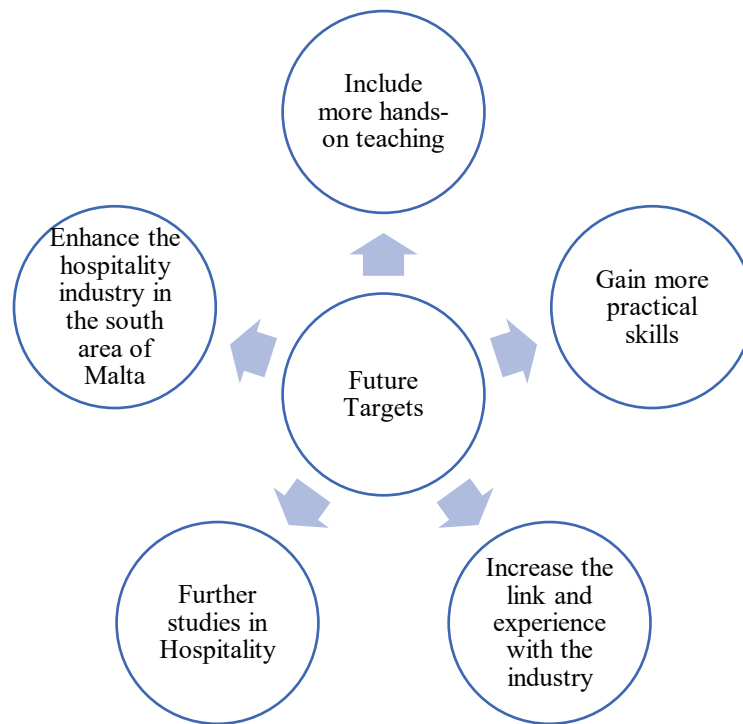
Figure 8: Future Targets of Educators

4.2 Focus group with personnel working in a Post Secondary Institution specialising in Tourism Studies

4.2.1 Opinion on the introduction of Hospitality as a VET subject in compulsory education

The opinion of the participants on the introduction of Hospitality as a vocational and applied subject in compulsory education is very positive. Some participants stated that the post-secondary institutions focusing on tourism studies reaped great benefits from it, since students were already exposed to the industry. Others stated that the post-secondary institutions had to conduct a much-required change to be able to offer a continuation of studies to students who had already studied the basics of Hospitality in secondary schools.

> *"I believe that it is not a coincidence that in the last two years, the*
> *number of students joining ITS after secondary school increased*

drastically. I believe that the introduction of the subject is driving
this change to our institute" stated participants 10.

One of the participants referred to the high level of the course, where students are very well prepared in theoretical knowledge, however, the practical skills are noticed to be lacking in general.

"I believe that students are well prepared and in advance when
joining the foundation or certificate courses. However, students are
not fully prepared in the practical aspect, as the subject is based on
more theory. This is since our education system focuses on the
grade and marks rather than on the skills achieved in a
qualification."

Participant 8 mentioned the struggle that the post-secondary institution and the education department had to face when creating syllabi and training teachers, as most of them had no training in Hospitality, but only experience in teaching a related area or subject, such as Home Economics.

"Teachers were not prepared and most of them do not come from
the industry, therefore intensive training was required. The institute
was initially involved, and this was a very good advantage"

4.2.2 Effect on post-secondary institution upon introduction of the subject in secondary schools

Participants claimed that the introduction of Hospitality as a VET subject had both positive and negative effects on post-secondary institutions. The subject is giving good exposure to the industry, yet certain areas are not covered, such as the industry of sport tourism, events, and heritage tourism. Participants who make part of the curriculum department claimed, that the syllabus being taught in secondary schools is very similar to the courses offered at the Foundation level at the Institute of Tourism Studies, which is leaving an impact on the students who do not obtain other qualifications apart from the Hospitality and do not have the entry requirements to choose a course from the certificate level. The foundation course could not be obsolete since there may be students who had never studied the subject before.

"One must keep in mind that the courses at ITS are not only open to students who studied hospitality at secondary schools, and therefore foundation courses should remain for those students who never studied the subject and do not have the proper qualifications to join a certificate course" stated participant 10.

The interest in the industry increased drastically from students to the extent that

"Nowadays, the demand for [career exposure] visits increased drastically, and also the demand to conduct career talks in schools. I noticed that the questions that they ask are much deeper in content and ask critical questions compared to what students used to ask before because they already have a good background in the industry" stated participant 11.

4.2.3 Positive and negative aspects of the programme

The participants from post-secondary institutions gave several positive and negative aspects to the holistic view of the programme. The aspects are illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5: Positive and negative aspects from post-secondary narratives

Positive Aspects	Negative Aspects
Assessment is diverse and different modes of assessment are applied in different assignments.	The same physical and human resources in state schools are not present and/or the same for non-state schools.
Work-based learning initiatives	Limited time to allow the realistic picture of service in different departments.
Students are exposed at an earlier stage to the industry and what it entails.	Vocational subjects are still seen as a subject for the low achievers.
	Too many changes in the education system and syllabi in the last ten years.
	Assessment should be ongoing throughout the whole scholastic year incorporating all students' work rather than assignment-based.
	The syllabus is very rigid and vast.
	Limited information from the guidance team and career advisors about the possibilities to have a career in Hospitality and to study in post-secondary institutions like ITS.

The participants emphasised the importance of having good communication between MFED officials and post-secondary institutions as this would be beneficial to both ends. Participant 8 stated:

> *"Post-secondary institutions should review programmes, policies, and procedures, especially for those students who already studied the subject as it could end up with a higher drop-out rate. One should identify the repetitive content and utilize it in a better way, where one could offer more practice, which is lacking in secondary schools. This will reduce the pressure of exams on students, and it will also result in holistic development in the subject."*

Some of the participants claimed that despite the fact that assessment is diverse and different modes of assessment are being used, it is not always fair on students since they are not awarded marks for the presentation, layout, format, and other extra things are done that are not assessed by the rigid system of MATSEC. Participants also claimed that the main focus ends up being on assessment and the theoretical side of the programme which is *"resulting in having very knowledgeable students with a lack of practical skills and when they come to apply the knowledge into practice, they struggle to the extent that they fail"*.

4.2.4 Shall the programme be awarded from tourism studies post-secondary institution/s?

The responses varied since some participants believe that it would be a good initiative, as the personnel working within the post-secondary institutions are professionals in the field and not just in assessment. On the other hand, others believe that unless the whole educational system is changed, having various awarding bodies would not work. One of the participants (participant 8) stated that the awarding body shall be autonomous.

> *"An autonomous entity will result in an independent entity from any institution and this way, it will be fairer, and with the same level depending on the qualification being awarded. If ITS awards the SEC qualification of Hospitality in secondary school, naturally ITS would base its awarding criteria on its needs, and therefore a student who does not wish to further the studies at ITS would end*

up with a useless qualification to use at UoM or MCAST. If the autonomous system had to occur, professionals from all institutions must be involved. It is unfair that for students who are studying applied subjects and getting a certificate from UoM, the certificate is then not valid to be used at non-vocational post-secondary institutions. The same things go for SSP&C programmes. This is due to the monopolist system."

4.2.5 Missing link between ITS and secondary school educators

Secondary school educators lack practical skills since the majority have never worked or had a career in the industry. The participants claimed that they cannot understand how the educators could teach and assess practical skills if they have never experienced the service departments themselves. They claimed that it is ideal to have people who have worked in the industry and fill the gap by completing a pedagogical course to become teachers.

Educators should have the opportunity to train at post-secondary institutions as part of their professional development courses and shall be renumerated for taking extra training or courses. Post-secondary institutions require more resources, including human resources for such a collaboration to be put into practice.

4.3 Focus group with personnel working in the Hospitality Industry

4.3.1 Views on the introduction of Hospitality as a VET subject in secondary schools

The participants of this focus group commented that with the introduction of the vocational subject of Hospitality in secondary school, the industry has a new ray of light of having locals working within the different departments. This, however, could only be possible if the correct messages and exposure are given, to give students a realistic picture of the hospitality industry.

"In recent years, we had seen less and less local people working in local hotels and hospitality businesses, and the introduction of hospitality as from a young age, in the long run, have a strong contribution to overcome this issue. If this initiative persists, it will have a strong effect on the hospitality talent and more people will join the industry on different roles" stated participant 14.

The participants stated that the role of the teacher plays a very important part to overcome the perception that the hospitality industry does not offer a professional career or that the subject is only for low-achiever students.

> *"We as professionals working in the industry must put our foot in this and help to translate the passion to students at an early age to entice within the industry. Students must understand that they need to be developed holistically, that when you finish a course, you do not expect to become a manager instantly, but gain the experience and get your hands dirty on operations before actually leading a company/ department" stated participant 15.*

Others stated that whilst it is very important that the teacher is knowledgeable in the field and uses the correct pedagogy, it is empirical that the teacher has a good experience of working within the industry.

> *"The programme is very good, however, the selection of teachers teaching the subject should be passed through a very thin sieve as at times we have teachers not even knowing what the industry itself is. This makes it more difficult for students to engage within the industry and one is motivated to further their studies as they would not have gained the true picture of the industry. someone must tell the students that our industry does not offer a Monday to Friday 9- 5 p.m. job, but must work on weekends, holidays, etc. The true picture should be given from day one, not to make it ugly, but to be as real as possible".*

4.3.2 The long-term effect on the industry

The introduction of the subject at such an early age has its pros and cons to the industry. From an early age, students will be aware of what the industry entails and what jobs are available, the requirements they need to work that particular job, and understand the commitment required. This is very fruitful for the industry as students would go to post-secondary institutions knowing that this is the right path for them, with less chances of dropping out in the first years of studies. However, as stated by participant 12... *"making students choose at such an early age is not very effective since they tend to choose a subject or area, either because their peers did so, or*

because their parents told them to, or because they think that it is their dream job, not to mention liking the teacher or the classroom".

The partnership agreement with different hotels and businesses is beneficial, as the company could have the opportunity to train its future employees as early as possible and invest in young talent. However, the limited time on-premises during lessons is a very big drawback, as students will not be given the full picture of the operational service. The students must be taught life skills and basic working skills at school and in the vocational subjects, as employees nowadays lack such skills.

> *"The fact that there is a big discrepancy in students studying VET and applied is a big challenge for us and we need to sit down with ITS, ministry, and other stakeholders and decide whether this is doable. Personally speaking, I would not want a person working with me not even caring about doing his/her hair in the morning. So, these students, who lack life skills and basic skills, should be given this type of curriculum? They need to know how to read, write, use a computer, even if you are a cleaner in today's world" stated participant 14.*

4.3.3 Positive and negative aspects of the programme

The participants from the industry gave several positive and negative aspects to the holistic view of the programme. The aspects are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Positive and negative aspects from the industry's narratives

Positive Aspects	Negative Aspects
Dedicated teachers	Limited time for lessons and partnership placements
	The education system remained the same for vocational subjects (timetable, assessment, etc)
	Placements are only done during school hours

4.3.4 Industry's input to improve the programme

The participants claimed that there should be more collaboration between the industry and schools, so professionals can visit schools and conduct lessons in school together with the teacher. This will ensure experiential teaching with the proper pedagogy and methodology. This might also be a possibility if the curriculum does not remain as rigid as it is at the moment and the focus would be more on skills rather than on grades and theory.

The industry could offer students the possibility to experience the industry holistically. This should be initiated by offering the students a guest experience to understand what the subject better and what working within the industry entails. Professionals could also compile their experiences in a set of video clips for students to see and use during their studies.

> *"Students should be offered the possibility to have the guest experience during the first year of studies as they would understand what they will be offering and working in when furthering their studies in hospitality. Professionals from the industry should be helpful in different challenges, competitions, etc." stated participant 15.*

4.3.5 Hospitality as a career

The participants were asked to give their views on how the subject could be more attractive in order to perceive a job within the Hospitality industry as a potential career. The participants claimed that it is very important to involve professionals in career talks, subject choices talks and seminars, in exhibitions, competitions, and school events. Students should be exposed to all areas within the industry including "IT, Engineering in Hospitality, historical places, maintenance, etc".

To be successful, authorities, ministries, and industry representatives should work together to create a holistic involvement before changes are conducted. It is important that all workers are involved and not just managers who guide the students in placements. This is because it is such workers that do the dirty work and they can provide a much clearer picture of what the career entails more than people working behind a desk.

The participants emphasised the involvement of parents throughout the whole discussion. Parents should be well educated and given all the information about the industry and its job opportunities. They should be informed about the requirements needed to work in a particular area and the responsibilities their children will be having once working a particular job.

Conclusion of research findings

This chapter incorporated the finding of the study gathered from three focus groups and transcribed using a narrative inquiry technique. The findings from each focus group were themed as illustrated in Figure 9. The researcher will be discussing the themes identified in the next chapter.

Educator's Narrative

- Importance of physical and human resources
- Experiential Teaching
- Importance of working with the industry (partnerships)
- Theory-based subject
- Limited teaching time
- Teacher Training requirements
- Reliable yet rigid assessment
- Perception that subject is for low-achievers
- Holistic approach
- Discrepancy between state and non-state schools

Post-secondary institutions Narrative

- Pathway to post-secondary institutions
- Theory-based subject
- Limited teaching time
- Teachers without experience in the field
- Increase in students intake
- Rigid assessment
- collaboration between MfED and Post-secondary institutions
- Holistic approach
- Autonomous assessment entity

Industry's Narrative

- Pathway to having more local talent in industry
- Perception that industry is for low achievers
- Importance of parents' involvement
- Partnership with schools
- Teachers lack experience in the field
- Limited teaching time
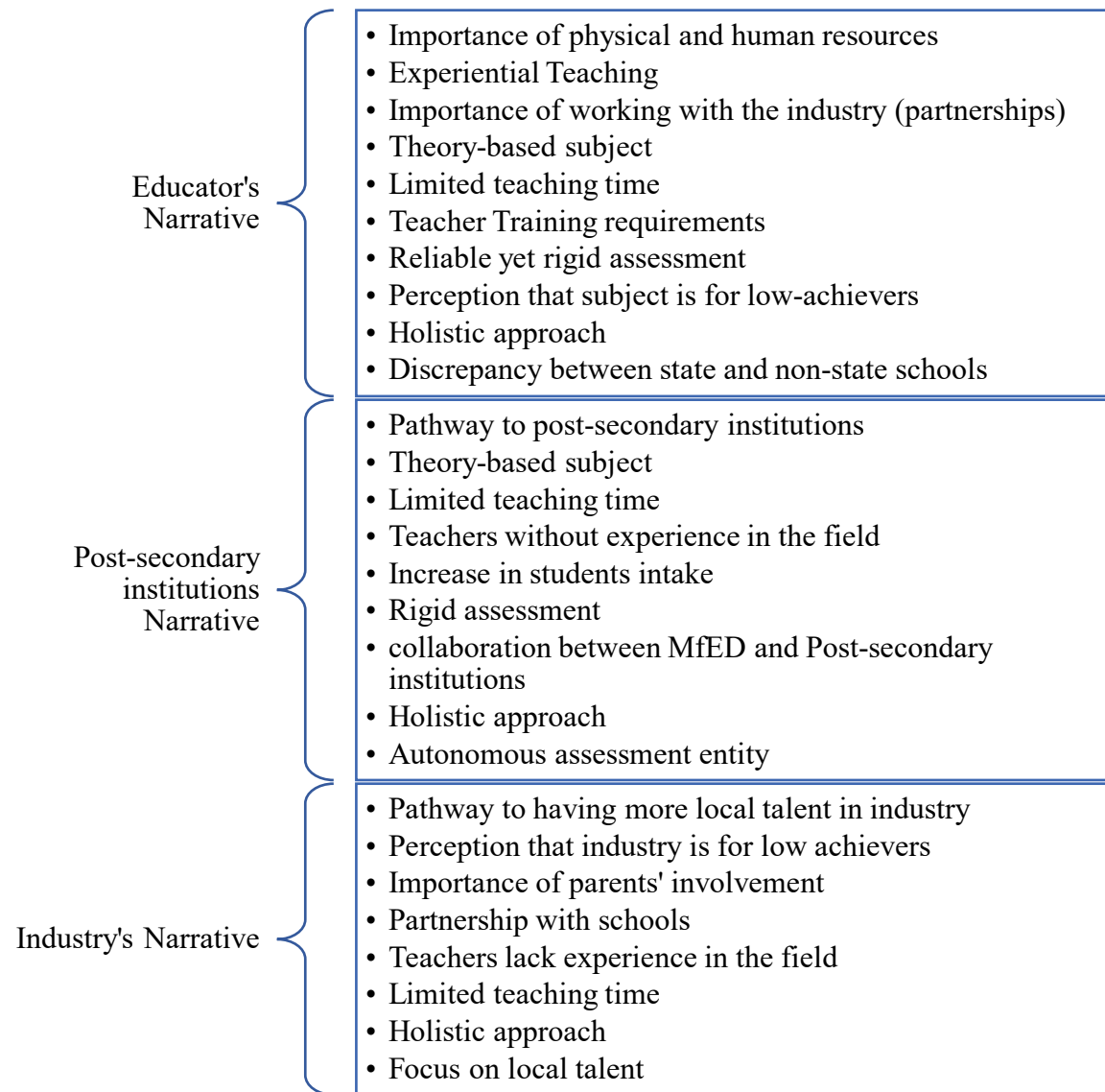- Holistic approach
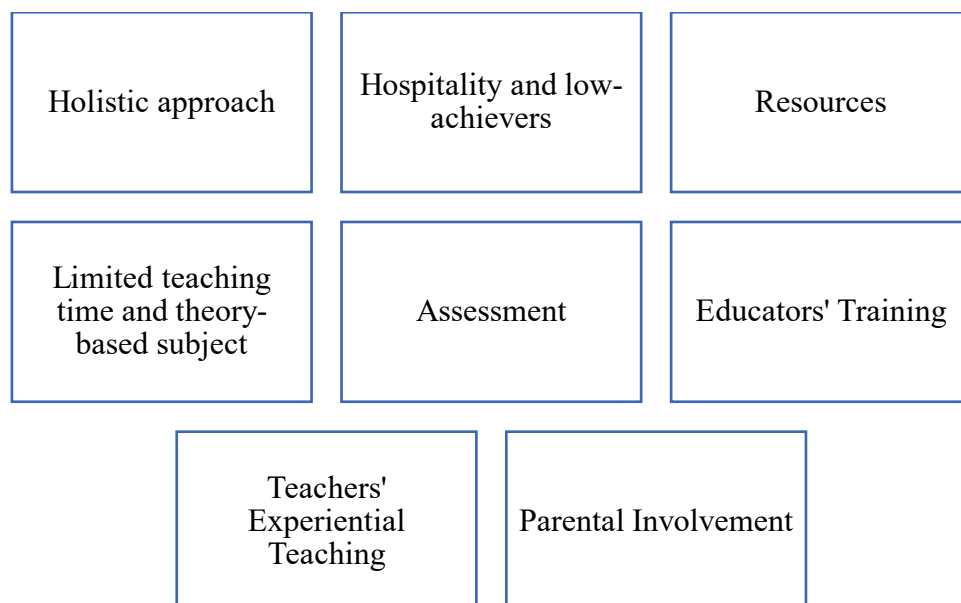- Focus on local talent

Figure 9: Narrative themes

Chapter 5: Discussion

Recalling the findings outlined in the previous chapter and the main and sub-research questions highlighted in the first chapter, unquestionably, the research questions were addressed utterly and thoroughly. The results indicated that there is a positive perception of the introduction of Hospitality as a vocational subject within compulsory education from the three main sectors - from compulsory schooling educators, post-secondary personnel, and the industry representative. However, further improvements and teething problems of the programme were identified in all sectors. This lead to answer the sub-research question of how academia and the industry could come together to meet and exceed the expectations of future employees and future market needs. The findings showed that the programme is the initial stage for a person to start a career in the Hospitality Industry, and post-secondary institutions and the businesses within the industry should offer a continuation to identify local talent and see a career in the Hospitality Industry as a profession.

5.1 Narrative Themes

The data collected through focus groups - referred to as 'narratives' in this chapter, were rigorously analysed and the researcher identified themes gathered from the narratives. The themes emanated are illustrated in Figure 10.

Holistic approach	Hospitality and low-achievers	Resources
Limited teaching time and theory-based subject	Assessment	Educators' Training
Teachers' Experiential Teaching	Parental Involvement	

Figure 10: Narrative Themes in discussion

5.1.1 Holistic approach

The Hospitality subject programme offers a holistic approach through its syllabus, partnerships, challenges, and assessment. Literature confirms that an effective vocational programme is of utmost importance, as it combines the development of skills and ensures that teachers are reflective on their practices (Faraday et al, 2011). Narratives from all three sectors in this study argued that whilst it is important for students to learn the content and aqcuire the knowledge, it is much more important that they achieve the so-called twenty-first-century skills and be transformed holistically. Managers in hotels claimed that during recruitment, they prefer to select applicants who have soft skills such as displaying a good attitude, knowing how to work in a team and being well groomed, rather than selecting the most qualified applicant who does not acquire these skills. They said that nowadays, that businesses offer their own internal training and work duties could be learned if they have a good attitude. The researcher believes that learning should not only be held in a classroom, and that the challenges, competitions, on-the-job training, and extra courses which are offered as part of the programme, give a holistic aspect to the subject and that students learn skills and competencies through informal education.

5.1.2 Hospitality and low-achievers

The narratives from this study adhere to the literature that vocational subjects - especially the subject of hospitality, attract students who are low achievers or are from working-class families. This however is due to the perception that the general public has on the industry and its vocational and applied route. (Atkins and Flint; 2015; Kizza et al, 2019). The Ministry for Education of Malta worked hard in the past six years to change this perception and to give vocational paths the parity of esteem to academic subjects, such as sciences and languages. In Malta, one can observe the shift in subject choice in the past three years, where on average, more than 70% of the year 9 students study one or two vocational subjects in their compulsory education (MEDE, 2020). The Institute for Tourism Studies also encountered a 136% student intake increase from 2018 to 2020 (ITS, 2021). This sustains the evidence that the marketing strategies of both institutions and the national education strategy - including the MyJourney, are reaching the target to overcome the perception that vocational subject is only suitable for low achievers. The narratives from the industry claimed that they should work hand in hand with

schools, education departments, post-secondary institutions and parents to instill the passion and pride of working within the hospitality industry. Every path is chosen, the schools and industry should ensure that they identify the local talent and embrace it, to ensure a shift in perception of the industry. One must keep in mind that the hospitality industry contains various jobs at various scales, from general-hands workers to CEOs, and in every position, one requires specifc sets of skills, competencies and qualifications.

In the scholastic year of 2019/2020, Malta introduced the applied route within compulsory education, to target those year-nine students who academically struggle to achieve good grades and those who study in a more hands-on manner. A good number of students enrolled for these subject, with ninety-nine students choosing Applied Hospitality in 2019 and ninety-two in 2020 (MEDE, 2020). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other matters, including union issues, the programme could not be properly analysed as students missed a good number of lessons, and they had a lengthy period of online learning, where hands-on practical work could not be completed. Students were also given marks pro-rata due to education in content and assessment. In light of this, after analysing deeply the narratives of educators, the researcher believes that the applied syllabus and assessment procedure should be revamped to target the needs of the local economy, but most of all, to reach the needs of the students and to offer a system where all the learning and work done throughout the year make part of the final grade, so as to offer a more holistic

5.1.3 Resources

To teach a vocational subject in an applied method, educators need adequate physical and human resources to ensure that teaching and learning areas address the industries' expectations. Narratives in this study praised the initiative taken by the Ministry of Education to build workshops simulating a hotel for lessons to be conducted. During workshops on the other hand, all participants spoke about the discrepancy in physical and human resources between state and non-state schools. Educators from non-state schools argued that the lack of resources makes it more difficult for them to teach and assess appropriately and as requested. As stated in the literature, it is very important to have space, equipment, materials, and supplies that simulate that which is found in the industry, so as to ensure an effective vocational programme (Prosser & Quigley, 1949; European Agency 2014). After the narratives

were analysed, the researcher deems that if schools are to offer the same programme, they should offer the same resources in all centres, as students will be at a disadvantage if they do not have the opportunity to learn within the same environment.

The Ministry of Education tried to minimise this discrepancy by distributing yearly funds for vocational subjects to all state and non-state schools. MFED signed a memorandum of understanding with Maltese and Gozitan four and five-star hotels in 2018, where all schools offering Hospitality as a subject were partnered with one hotel and students can train at the place of work. The researcher believes that this is a very good initiative and helpful for those schools that lack physical resources. Moreover, the professionalism of the employees in hotels provides an exceptional experience for students and gives them a true picture of the industry. Narratives of industry representatives asserted that it is of utmost importance that schools and the industry work together, support each other and organise programmes for students and their parents. The researcher highly believes that learning should not only be limited to the school environment, but should be extended to the workplace. Having legal requirements to abide by from both ends, could be challenging in implementing such a programme, but it is doable if the necessary risk assessment and legal procedures are in place. The researcher reckons that to keep a programme up to date according to economical and industrial requirements, the link should also be extended between school and post-secondary institutions. Students and their educators should be offered accredited courses to upskill and update their knowledge and competencies.

5.1.4 Limited teaching time and theory-based subject

These two themes stemmed from all the three narratives of this study and it is evident that these are common perceptions of the programme. The educational system in secondary schools in Malta allocates a 40-minute lesson, four times a week for twenty-seven (27) scholastic weeks. Usually, the lessons are slotted as a double-lesson and therefore teachers have an eighty-minute lesson held twice a week to conduct lessons covering all the content and transfer skills and competencies to the students. The researcher noticed that the vocational subjects were woven into the Maltese secondary educational system and no changes were implemented in timetables, and teaching methodologies. One has to keep in mind that the main difference between vocational and academic subjects, is the amount of practice

vocational subjects require to meet their purpose. From the narratives, the researcher concluded that the time available per lesson is not sufficient to teach the subject in the most practical way possible. The post-secondary personnel stated that the programme lacks a sufficient amount of practice, despite that the students are given a lot of knowledge on the various fields being studied.

The lack of time available to cover the syllabus and the rigid assessment lead to another theme, that of having a vocational subject focusing more on theory rather than practice. As literature reveals, practice is the pediment of a vocational subject. This is confirmed by Prosser's (date) eighth and eleventh theorems. In this study, educators argued that every year, they struggle to finish the syllabus and assessment and end up covering content in a theoretical way. They also claimed that they cannot perform a whole operational procedure in an eighty-minute lesson, and that they need more support to prepare resources and material for each practical. From the researcher's experience, it was concluded that there are three reasons why the subject took the theoretical approach. One of the reasons is the limited time available for lessons and preparation of lessons and the second reason is the lack of experienced teachers have in the industry, leading to having educators not comfortable in performing lessons using the practical approach. The third reason is the fact that educators must allocate a lot of time for assessment, which is rigid and time-consuming.

5.1.5 Assessment

Assessment is one of the major key factors in a vocational education system. This is evident in a lot of studies and policies, such as publications by CEDEFOP and the European Agency. The awarding body of vocational subjects in secondary schools is MATSEC, within the University of Malta, even though there are two self-accreditation bodies in Malta (MCAST and ITS) that specialise in vocational fields. Educators claimed that the Maltese VET assessment in secondary schools is fair and standardised, yet it is very rigid and time-consuming. The perception of a programme of educators tends to be highly dependent on its assessment method (Scharfer and Lissitz, 1987) and this corroborates with this study. Educators claimed that assessment is an important part of the programme and the fact that the vocational subjects are at par in esteem with other academic subjects at qualification level, gives the subject a good status within the educational system. Educators, on the other hand,

feel that there is a lot of focus on assessment and not enough importance on teaching practical skills and competencies. Narratives from the other sectors agreed that the assessment is valid and fair, yet there is a lot of focus on the written component. Post-secondary lecturers stated that the assessment should be based on the coursework done throughout the year and not just in few times in a year, as students are studying for assessment and not for the purpose to learn skills required to work within the industry. From the researcher's experience, assessment is deemed as fair, yet educators should be allowed more flexibility, as currently, the educator's system is very rigid.

5.1.6 Training

For an educational programme to be successful, one should invest in the educator and the training required to be able to perform efficiently in class, ensuring the best teaching and learning experience for the students who will be future employees. Prosser (1940) stated in his second theorem that having trained teachers and instructors is of utmost importance in vocational education. Educators must be equipped with soft skills to meet the industry expectations through their teaching (Singh, et al., 2013). The data contributes a clearer understanding of the importance of training, as narratives from all the sectors involved in this study specified the importance of having trained educators. As stated by Wallenborn & Heyneman (2009), the country must invest in teacher training when introducing a school-based vocational system. This was highly narrated in the narratives of educators, as the majority feel that they were not given enough training to be compatible to teach the subject. One must keep in mind that vocational education in secondary school in Malta is quite a new concept, and that since the MyJourney project was launched, the Ministry for Education had to train educators to start teaching instantly. The educators selected came from a related field, however, teachers still feel that this is not enough. This is also the pulse of the post-secondary and industry representatives, as they claimed that the educators teaching Hospitality in secondary school are not professionals in the fields and that the majority have no experience in working within the industry. The researcher feels that whilst it is true that a lot of educators do not have industry experience, they are given a lot of opportunities from different institutions to gain skills and competencies. Master courses are being offered from the University of Malta, the Institute for Education, and other stand-alone courses are

offered by the Institute for Tourism Studies. Another issue with teacher training is the fact that the subject is being taught by one teacher per class, and therefore the teacher must have th expertise in all the tourism, hospitality, and operational fields. This is not the case in post-secondary institutions and within the industry, as each lecturer will be an expert in the field s/he teaches.

5.1.7 Teacher's Experience in the industry

Wallenborn & Hayneman (2009) argued that educators may not be the right experts to prepare young people for the workplace, as their expertise is in the methodology of teaching and using the right pedagogy according to the age and ability of their students. The researcher thinks that, if the teachers undergo experiential learning in different areas of the industry through placements or stand-alone courses and combine it with their teaching profession, it will result in having holistic educators who can transmit not only the theoretical knowledge but the skills and competencies through experiential teaching as well. Narratives from all sectors emphasised this issue of having teachers who have never worked in a hospitality environment or business. Educators stated that they struggle to teach the subject, especially the practical aspect and the concepts that require a procedure, such as restaurant operations. Narratives from the industry representatives asserted that the hotels and restaurants should offer all educators the possibility to spend some time working with them in all departments in order to understand and learn the procedures and good practices conducted in the industry. The researcher believes that educators should be awarded an accredited qualification when obtaining practical skills, should they undergo such training. They should also be subsided if they voluntarily sit for courses at ITS on a part-time basis. Malta is currently facing a shortage of teachers in many subjects and therefore one cannot afford to lose more teachers, but one should give them incentive to further their studies and broaden their parameters in teaching.

5.1.8 Importance of parents' involvement

The narratives emphasised the importance of involving parents in every step of the students' journey. The researcher believes that parents are one of the main pillars in education and subject choices. Parents influence their children on which career to take and which sector is the best to work in the future. If parents have the perception that a career in the hospitality industry is only for low achievers and working-class individuals, then high flyers will not choose to study in a tourism institution. In 2019,

the Ministry for Education organised a national option choice fair, where students in year 8, together with their guidance teachers, career advisors, and parents could visit the fair and each subject choice was explained in detail. That particular year, the percentage of students who chose hospitality as an option in state schools increased by 75% and the same amounts chose the subject in 2020 (MEDE, 2020). Parents had the opportunity to understand the content, assessment, and experiences their children will encounter when studying the subject, and the further areas of study and job opportunities were explained. The researcher believes that educating the parents about the industry and post-secondary vocational institutions and their importance is of great importance to change the perception of the general public. Narratives from the industry insisted on the importance of involving parents. Hotels participating in the school-hotel partnership should ensure that parents are involved in the placements and information sessions should be conducted for parents. Parents should appreciate the dedication, art, responsibilities, and skills required to work in such a hospitable environment. On the other hand, the post-secondary institutions and the industry should work on a strategic plan to boost the perception of the public on the hospitality and tourism industry.

5.2 Conclusion of discussions

In this chapter, the researcher concluded that the outcomes of the focus groups conducted to gather data, directly targeted the research questions and provided a holistic perspective on Hospitality as an option subject in compulsory education in Malta. The views of the three sectors mirror a positive perspective of the programme with further areas of improvement, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study was conducted to discover the perception of different stakeholders in education and the hospitality industry on the introduction of Hospitality as a vocational subject in obligatory education, and to analyse the pros and cons of the programme to date. The researcher felt that this research is important for the future development of the programme, in order to improve its negative characteristics and enhance the positive aspects. Considering the findings and discussions evaluated in the previous chapters conclusively, the research questions were addressed entirely and comprehensively. The perceptions of the three sectors were gathered and valued. The expected and anticipated impact on post-secondary education and the industry should one introduce the subject, were investigated. Ways and means on how academia and industry can come together to meet and exceed the expectations of future employees and the future market were also targeted.

From this study, it was delineated that the introduction of the vocational subject of Hospitality in obligatory education is of utmost importance to the Maltese economy and the Hospitality and Tourism industry, even since the Maltese GDP highly
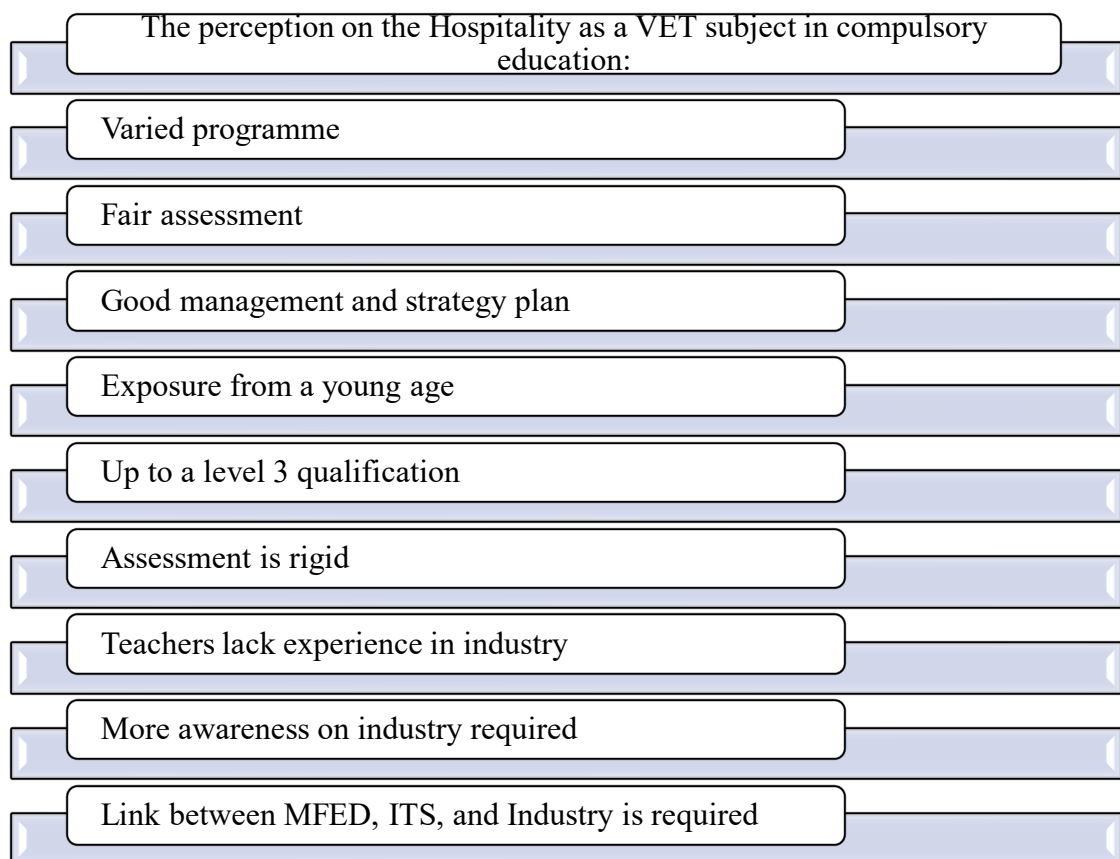
The perception on the Hospitality as a VET subject in compulsory education:

Varied programme

Fair assessment

Good management and strategy plan

Exposure from a young age

Up to a level 3 qualification

Assessment is rigid

Teachers lack experience in industry

More awareness on industry required

Link between MFED, ITS, and Industry is required

Figure 11: Collated perceptions on the Hospitality subject

depends on this sector as observed in statistics issued by the National Statistics Office[1] (NSO, 2021). Figure 11 shows the perceptions of the participants on the subject. The subject offers students the opportunity to gain soft skills through the lessons conducted in class, through on-the-job training, additional courses such as that of the food handling license, the assessment, and also through the different challenges and projects organised yearly. However, it is evident that educators do not have enough time to teach the subject content practically and educators tend to focus their lessons based on the assessment rather than on a holistic approach. Through this study, it was recorded that teachers, despite having the teaching qualifications as per regular teacher call within the Public Service, they require intense training in the different fields that the industry is compiled of, especially training in practical operations. According to narratives from all sectors of this study, if this issue is not imminently targeted, this will have repercussions on the programme, including a decrease in students selecting the subject to study, a wrong perception of the subject from students and their parents and unprepared yet qualified future employees.

This study revealed that the programme is offering the opportunity to students to learn the skills, knowledge, and competencies required to work within the Hospitality industry from a young age. In fact, since its conception, the Institute of Tourism Studies has drastically increased its student intake, by precisely 136% from the scholastic year 2018 to the scholastic year 2020. This is a clear indication that the exposure to the subject and the industry from a young age is leaving its fruit, where students are furthering their studies in Hospitality and Tourism and seeing the industry as an opportunity to build and progress with a career. However, and as indicated by literature, the narratives of this study confirmed that low-achieving students and students coming from the lower strand of the social class, tend to choose the subject in higher numbers as there is still the perception that Hospitality is for the non-academics or high-flyers. The narratives from all sectors agreed that a national marketing campaign is required to expose the true picture of the industry, showing the skills, responsibilities, attitude, experience, and qualifications required to work in a hospitable environment. The subject is varied, offering content in different operations, however, it is too focused on the hotel and restaurant operations. As suggested by participants, it would be ideal to upgrade the subject according to the

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[1] This fact is prior to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

needs of the industry and include content that is currently in high market demand such as diving, hospitality on superyachts, and service in aviation. This research revealed that the subject is well managed and that the strategic plan on the way forward is fit for purpose. Nevertheless, more collaboration between the Ministry for Education, post-secondary institutions, and the industry are required to ensure the programme is updated according to the needs of the industry, with minimal impact on the educators and the students.

6.1 Limitations

Results of this narrative study provided a foundation for an augmented understanding of the perception of Hospitality as a VET subject in obligatory education; however, some limitations required deliberation. The main limitation of this study was that there is no preliminary literature about the introduction of vocational and applied subjects in secondary schools in Malta, and thus, the researcher had to gather information from primary sources. Comparing the programme to other countries was challenging since Malta is the only country within the European Union that offers vocational education and training in compulsory education at the age of fourteen years incorporated within mainstream education.

Despite all the pros, focus groups had certain limitations. By being in groups of six people, this resulted in a lack of direct participation by some. The researcher conducted the focus groups sessions online due to the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictive measures at that time. This had an impact and created a limitation in not being able to directly feel what the participants were discussing. Every person could be biased on the subject due to several reasons (Gaille, 2015).

A narrative research design was the most appropriate approach for the study because it permitted the researcher to evaluate the expressed narratives of the participants (Creswell & Cresweell, 2018); however, due to the small sample size and personal nature of the participants' collective experiences, the results may not apply to all individuals. This study was conducted with eighteen participants coming from three different sectors which are all stakeholders of the programme. However, generalising conclusions could not be withdrawn due to this limitation.

These limitations, however, do not detract from the overall usefulness of the study's results. Numerous participants reiterated similar ideas when promoted to speak on

the same topics, demonstrating cohesion of opinion and suggesting accuracy and verifiability. Additionally, the results are supported by recent literature on vocational education and perception of VET programmes. The large number of themes that overlapped between the present study and recent literature suggests that the participants' responses provide an accurate and reliable portrayal of transcendental leadership.

6.2 Future recommendations

This section aims to act as the foundation for future studies, with similar research aims. The recommendations were divided into two categories: recommendations for the programme and recommendations for future studies.

6.2.1 Recommendations for future studies

Additional research would enhance the knowledge on the status of vocational education in Malta and smoothen the pathway for improvements of current programmes in the future. The researcher recommends the investigation on the effectiveness of teacher certification programmes, so as to understand the impact on quality vocational education offered in local schools. This will investigate the perception outlined in this study that teachers are not well-trained to teach the subject, despite the fact that they are qualified as teachers. The researcher also recommends the study of the efficacy of the Applied Hospitality programme and whether the students are being offered a programme that is suitable for their needs and level. Narratives told by educators in this study emphasised, that the Applied programme is too focused on assessment, rather than allowing students to nurture and master their talents in practice. The researcher recommends that a similar study is conducted on other vocational subjects being offered in obligatory education in Malta, so as to find out whether the perception on other subjects is similar to that of Hospitality. It would be highly interesting to compare the perspectives derived from this study to the perception of ITS programmes, so as to find out similarities and differences in assessment, quality and assurance, industry link, perception of the industry and also areas of improvement.

6.2.2. Recommendations for the Hospitality programme

From this study, the researcher recommends that the assessment method, especially for the Applied Hospitality programme, is revised in order to be more effective and

valid for students opting to study it. It is evident that the assessment, despite being fair across all schools, is very rigid and does not allow students to achieve their real grades, as the focus is more on the academic assessment rather than the vocational skills. It is also recommended that, despite keeping vocational education within mainstream education, the time allocated for the vocational and applied subjects is revised to allow more time for a practical pedagogical approach. It is also suggested that when a process or procedure is being covered, the teacher and students would have enough time to complete it, rather than cover it in a theoretical way. The researcher recommends that schools, post-secondary institutions, and the industry work together to offer accredited programmes as part of the learning which covers practical aspects and soft skills - which could be used as part of the entry requirements in post-secondary institutions.

6.3 Concluding comments

The introduction of vocational programmes in mainstream education is of utmost importance to the Maltese economy. Hospitality and Tourism are paramount assets to the country, as 30% of the GDP is derived from this sector (MTA, 2019). The vocational subjects allow those students who flourish in showing their talent in an applied way, rather than in an academic way, and therefore one must ensure that the programmes offered are of high quality, tailor-made for the needs of the students, and with a fair and valid assessment. The collaboration of post-secondary institutions and the industry are impeccable to ensure the programme is in line with the industry expectations. The perception of the stakeholders, the labour market, and the general public should all be considered before reviewing a policy or a strategy, so that the programme offered meets the needs of the economy and the industry, but above all, the needs of the students opting to study the subject.

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Appendices

7.1 Appendix 1

Consent Form (sent to participants via email)

Research Participation Consent Form

The perception on the introduction of Hospitality as a vocational subject in compulsory education: A comparative study

I, _____, understand that the purpose of this focus group is solely based for research purposes.

I am notified and understand that:

- I have read the information sheet regarding the study and could ask any questions relating to the study or my participation.
- My participation is completely voluntary, and I am free to drop my participation at any time of the study.
- My identity will be kept confidential but ascribed to as a 'Participant', without mentioning the place of work or specific job role.
- I commit to keeping the identity of other participants confidential.
- I have the right to abstain from answering any of the questions in the session.
- I reserve the right to end my participation at any time by leaving the focus group session.
- Only anonymised data will be sent to the supervisor.
- The audio recording will be stored on a home computer in a secure place and saved password protected in an encrypted format.
- The audio recording will be destroyed once the study is completed.
- I was provided with the contact details of the researcher and the supervisor.

By completing and submitting this form I give my consent to Yanica Gauci, ID no 503687M, to process the information provided by myself for research and the completion of the Master's thesis as approved by ITS and in line with the applicable ITS rules and regulations and Maltese Legislation.

Participant Name: _____	ID number: _____
Participant Signature: _____	Date: _____
Researcher: Yanica Gauci ID number: 503687M	

7.2 Appendix 2

Information letter (sent to participants via email)

Information Letter – Focus Group

Dear Teacher/ ITS personnel/ Industry Representative,

I am currently reading a Master's in Business and Administration (MBA) in International Hospitality Management at the Institute of Tourism Studies, Malta in affiliation with the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management. Part of my studies include a thesis titled "The perception on the introduction of hospitality as a vocational subject in compulsory education: A comparative study" and my supervisor is Mr. Andrew Debattista.

Hospitality as a vocational and/or applied subject has been introduced in compulsory education since 2011, where students have the option to select the subject to study in their last three years of compulsory education. The basic spectrum of the industry, including the local and international tourism industry, health and safety at the workplace, restaurant operations, room division, and food preparation are incorporated within the syllabi assessed by MATSEC at the University of Malta. An approximate of 250 students are choosing to study the subject yearly, coming from 28 different state and non-state schools.

I would like to invite you to participate in an online focus group interview. Through this focus group I would like to discuss with you the perceptions, areas of improvement, and recommendations to ensure a high-level programme at MQF level 3 is being delivered to prospective future employees within the industry. This focus group will last for 60-90 minutes. Your participation is highly appreciated and important to my research. Please be assured that all data collected will be kept anonymous. Should you accept my invitation, please read, and sign the attached consent form and send back at your convenience via email on the email address provided below.

Ethical clearance from Academic Research and Publications Board at ITS have been granted.

Please note that:

- Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you are free to decline participation.
- Participants will be protected when disseminating results using coding.
- Only anonymised data will be sent to the supervisor.
- Audio recording will be stored on a home computer in a secure place and saved password protected in encrypted format.
- Audio recording will be destroyed once study is completed.
- You have the right to abstain from answering any of the questions in the session.

Should you wish to discuss any issues regarding the research, or receive a copy of the results after completion of the study (June 2021), please feel free to contact me or my supervisors using the contact information below:

Researcher: Yanica Gauci
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Supervisor: Andrew Debattista
Tel: +356 2379 3253
Email: andrew.debattista@its.edu.mt

Thank you

Yanica Gauci

7.3 Appendix 3

Focus Group 1 – Educators teaching in secondary schools – Questions

1. How do you describe your experience in teaching Hospitality and why?

2. What are the positive and negative aspects of the programme (as a whole)? How can the negative aspects be improved?

3. Does the subject prepare the students for the world of work? Why?

4. What training do you feel should be mandatory for educators and/or students?

5. Do you think the assessment is fair to the students?

6. What are your future targets in teaching and learning for the subject of Hospitality?

7.4 Appendix 4

Focus Group 2 – Personnel working in post-secondary institutions – Questions

1. What is your opinion on the introduction of VET subjects, specifically Hospitality, in compulsory education?

2. How do you think the introduction of the subject affected the ITS or other institutions?

3. What are the positive and negative aspects of the programme?

4. What do you think on the idea that the subject's awarding body will be ITS?

5. Are Hospitality students given priority when applying at iTS?

6. Educators feel there is a missing link between ITS and teachers. How could ITS improve this, and assist in teacher upgrading skills?

7. How could the programme be improved?

7.5 Appendix 5

Focus Group 3 – Industry Representatives – Questions

1. What are your views on the introduction of Hospitality in secondary schools?

2. How do you think the introduction of the subject will affect the industry in the long run?

3. What are the positive or negative aspects of the programme?

4. Do you think that students who have finished the course in Hospitality in secondary school are ready to work in the industry?

5. How can the industry help to improve the programme of Hospitality in secondary schools?

6. How can the subject be more attractive and make more people seeing the Hospitality industry as a career?

7.6 Appendix 6

Presentation used to explain the Hospitality programme to participants

Slide 7 — UNIT 3 (YEAR 11):
- Menu and service types
- Linen use in restaurants
- Table lay ups
- Sequence of service
- Customer's dining experience
- Preparation of cold and warm beverages
- Communication through front office
- Customer care
- Applying for a job
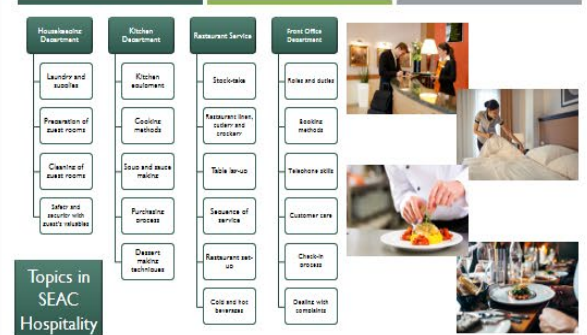- Housekeeping department

Slide 8 — SEAC HOSPITALITY
(APPLIED)

Slide 9 — Topics in SEAC Hospitality

Housekeeping Department	Kitchen Department	Restaurant Service	Front Office Department
Laundry and supplies	Kitchen equipment	Stock-take	Roles and duties
Preparation of guest rooms	Cooking methods	Restaurant linen, cutlery and crockery	Booking methods
Cleaning of guest rooms	Soup and sauce making	Table lay-up	Telephone skills
Safety and security with guest's valuables	Purchasing process	Sequence of service	Customer care
	Dessert making techniques	Restaurant set-up	Check-in process
	Cold and hot beverages		Dealing with complaints

Slide 10 — UNIT 1 (YEAR 9): BACK-OF-HOUSE PROCEDURES
- Reservation process
- Laundry supplies and cycle
- Food commodities
- Sauce making techniques
- Soup making
- Caring for equipment

Slide 11 — UNIT 2 (YEAR 10) FRONT-OF-HOUSE OPERATIONS
- Check-in process
- Communication of details about the business
- Preparation of rooms for occupancy
- Finishing meals
- Reworking meals
- Table lay-up
- Seating arrangements
- Customer's expectations during dining

Slide 12 — UNIT 3 (YEAR 11): GUEST RELATIONS
- Caring for guests' belongings
- Cleaning an occupied room
- Sequence of service
- Preparation of cold and warm beverages
- Communication and customer care through front office
- Cooking meat
- Cooking desserts
- Menus
- Taking orders

THE WORKSHOP
BAR, RECEPTION, RESTAURANT

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WORKSHOP
KITCHEN, LAUNDRY, BEDROOM

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