Dropping Out from Post-Secondary Vocational Education: A Case Study in Malta

Elena Torou, Suzanne Borg, Tatjana Chircop*
Corresponding Author: Tatjana.Chircop@mcast.edu.mt
*Applied Research and Innovation Centre, MCAST

Abstract: Withdrawing from higher education (HE) has a negative impact on the academic community and society in general. Leaving university is a complex decision-making process which is based on different factors that actually force a student to drop out from their studies. These factors have various effects on students’ career paths, psychology, on their families, on the educational institutions, and the state itself. The aim of this article is to identify the individual characteristics, socioeconomic, academic, emotional, and behavioural problems pertaining to student dropouts. A qualitative and quantitative research took place at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, based on data received from the Registrar’s Office for the period between 2017-2020. The data as based on the number of students who had resigned and who were analysed on a year by year rate as well as on a year and level rate. The results from the qualitative analysis showed that different external and personal factors contribute to the final decision of the students to leave higher education, whereas the results from the quantitative analysis showed that there are differences in relation to the level of study and year, as well as to the gender and institutes. In the last part of this paper, further recommendations are being given to support students to prevent them from dropping out from HE and help them in their educational path.

Keywords: Higher education; dropout; factors on leaving HE; prevention measures; MCAST

Introduction

Dropouts1 from tertiary education are present in universities all over the world. Dropping out is not necessarily an indication of an individual student’s failure, as some students could use the knowledge from the one year of their tertiary-level education to improve their job-market prospects, while others students might be able to retain credits from an initial period of study and then complete their studies after entering the workforce. As per Tinto (2010), the rate of dropouts is highest in first-year university students.

This paper is divided in two parts. The first part explores the factors which are leading students to dropping out of the tertiary education system or leaving early from VET, as well as the characteristics of students who are likely to drop out. A number of case studies from different countries are also being recorded. The second part is based on a qualitative analysis of the dropouts which occured at MCAST from 2014 till 2021. At the end of the paper, a number of tools to reduce early leaving from the educational and vocational training system are being recommended, as well as policies to support students’ success during their learning path of knowledge.

---

1 Dropouts are defined as students who leave the specified level of education without graduating with a first qualification at that level.
Factors Regarding Early Leaving From Higher Education

High or even low dropout rates may be an important indicator of problems in educational systems. The reasons for a student leaving from higher education, especially during the first or second year, is a result of one or more different factors. These factors could be categorised accordingly as external and personal reasons. By the term external we refer to factors related to gender, ethnicity, family background etc.; by the term personal we refer to the factors which are related to the behavioural and psychological characteristics of each individual. Many educational institutes in different countries have conducted research over the years in order to identify the factors that actually contribute to students leaving higher education without graduating. Borgonovi and Marconi (2020) carried out a study related to this; their study provided a comprehensive overview of the relationship between, on the one hand, socio-economic background, migrant background, and place of residence, and on the other hand, HE expectations, participation, and completion. The result of the analysis shows that students have different ambitions and expectations from higher education. These differences might play a role not only in the decision to access higher education, but also to access different programmes within higher education.

A research study which took place in Germany (A. Behr et al. 2020) on student dropouts from several disciplines has identified numerous possible reasons as to why students withdraw from tertiary education. The study was based on the National Educational Panel Study (NEPS), which included a wide range of information on study courses and students’ characteristics, and aimed at providing an encompassing analysis of determinants influencing students’ dropout decisions. Determinants can be categorized into demographic and family background, the financial situation of students, their prior education, institutional determinants, as well as motivation and satisfaction with their studies. In Denmark, for instance, about 19% of the youth cohort starts a VET programme; however, only 50% of these same students complete this educational trajectory (Thøgersen et al. 2020).

Other factors could also be issues related to stress or a broad mix of stressors which are creating difficulties for students’ adaptation to university (Antaramian 2015; Araújo, Gomes, Almeida, and Nuñez 2019; Lilleholt, Aaby, and Makransky 2019), especially in students with a lowered self-perception of mastery in academic and psychosocial areas (Wilson et al. 2019).

External Factors

External factors are factors related to students from a lower socio-economic background, as well as their gender, ethnicity, education, and family in general.

Students with a lower socio-economic background are less likely to complete their study programmes. A study by Glocker (2011) investigating the effects of financial aid on study success in Germany revealed that by increasing students’ allowance to support students, the dropout rate was significantly decreased. A study by Aina (2013) and Ghignoni (2017), both focusing on the relationship between the family background and the dropout decisions in Italy, found that parental education and social class plays a significant role in students’ decision-making process as to whether to leave or not HE.

With regard to the gender, there are some learning characteristics that are more frequently related with female students (Diniz et al. 2018). These learning characteristics are related to self-learning, personal initiative, perseverance in tasks, and competencies (Lin and Huang 2017). The study of Severiens and Dam (2012) indicated that when there is a gender group which is a minority, then this group is more likelier to drop out from a course or class.
Ethnic origin on the other hand is a factor that strongly interacts with other factors like students’ socio-economic background and gender (Reisel and Brekke 2010). In Bulgaria, there is for example the case of Roma students. The lower rates of study success of Roma students are associated with both their social class origins as well as their ethnic origin (Tilkidijev et al. 2011). Similar findings with respect to students from ethnic minorities have been recorded in Netherlands and Germany (Heublein 2010; Meeuwisse et al. 2009).

Further factors are related to the educational system and teaching methods. Students with clear educational trajectories are more successful in higher education than those following less direct or interrupted pathways. According to a Norwegian study by Hovdhaugen (2015), working more than 20 hours a week increases the probability of dropping out, whereas working for a maximum of 19 hours a week seems to have no significant influence on study success. Similar results are reported by Beerkens et al. (2011) for students from Estonia. They observe that more than 25 hours of off-study work decreases the probability of timely graduation.

Other elements, such as the culture of the university or curriculum, may also affect students’ academic experiences, as well as their sense of being part of a community, of being connected to other students, staff, and the institution (Kahu and Nelson 2018). This element could increase or decrease the dropout rate.

Teaching methods are considered to be another factor which can lead students to leave higher education. The methodologies used during the lessons, as well as the communication techniques, can make some students experience doubt with regard to the course and consequently not be interested. In research conducted under the Project (RELiVET) “Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe”, it was mentioned that, when the lessons provided are of a poor quality, students do not get engaged or interested in the subject. Another factor is the low expectations of teachers and students in relation to school and the high number of pupils per school and class.

**Personal Factors**

*Psychological Factors Lead to Dropping Out From HE*

Different research has taken place in order to identify the stressful factors that lead students to exit higher education without completing or even without even actually starting such courses (Tinto 2010). As per Bore et al. (2016), students in higher education experience a greater degree of stress compared with the general population.

Stress has been linked to mental health problems, which are highly prevalent among the student population and have been shown to impact learning and well-being (Stallman and King 2016). It is associated with student life and can have a significant impact on students’ lives and academic work. Agolla (2009) explained that this occurs because academic work is always associated with stressful activities.

Rawson, Bloomer, and Kendall (1999) found in their study that students experienced high academic stress at predictable times in each semester, such as when mastering a huge amount of the syllabus in a comparatively short period of time, preparing and taking exams, and the ranking of examination positions. Several authors have defined the concept of stress in diverse ways (Malach-Pines and Keinan 2007; Stein and Cutler 2002). For example, Malach-Pines and Keinan (2007) indicated that stress is generated by an environmental or social demand which has to be fulfilled by a person’s ability to contribute in a positive way as regards this demand.
New students are not ready to face the challenges of higher education (Blair 2017; Holdsworth, Turner, and Scott-Young 2018). The levels of students’ autonomy and resilience, for example, plays a decisive role in adjustment to university (Nordstokke 2019). Students with lower self-perception of mastery in academic and psychosocial areas will face more difficulties to be part incorporated in the society of university (Wilson et al. 2019). At the same time, students with higher levels of self-efficacy, personal resiliency, and coping strategies, will be more able to manage HE challenges and the difficulties in this academic transition (Bandura 1997; Girelli et al. 2018; Wilson, Babcock, and Saklofske 2019).

A research study based on an international study from America, Asia, Africa, Australia, and Europe refers to a high prevalence of symptoms of stress in more than 40% and of depression in more than 25% of those assessed (Cvetkovski et al. 2018). The literature suggests that lower optimism, higher levels of stress and anxiety, and lower stress tolerance as well as reduced levels of self-efficacy lead to students being dissatisfied and developing intentions to drop out (Brissette, Scheier, and Carver 2002; Eicher, Staerkle, and Clemence 2014; Solberg Nes, Evans, and Segerstrom 2009; Stajkovic, Bandura, Locke, Lee, and Sergent 2018).

In a research study which took place in Ghana (Edjah et al. 2020) and which was based on questionnaire data gathered from 500 students, the authors found that a large majority of the students showed moderate levels of stress, mostly in the academic domain. High stressors included study pressure, high academic competition, and requirements to meet deadlines.

In the current situation, another stressful element is the COVID-19 pandemic, which has interrupted conventional schooling; indeed, in many countries, online teaching is now a new routine for many students in higher education. Universities from around the world have been uncertain about how long the COVID-19 crisis will last and how it might affect the mental health of students and faculty. Teachers had to adapt to new pedagogical concepts and modes of delivery of teaching for which they may not have been trained. Many students experience challenges with respect to maintaining a sense of belonging to their peers, staff, and institution.

Other personal factors which can lead students to leave from HE is a loss of motivation and self-confidence, which can even turn into apathy and a sense of inferiority, and which are characteristics of student who are likelier to drop out (Stiburek et al. 2017). In fact, student motivation and self-efficacy are positively correlated with the probability of the successful completion of studies. In Finland for example, it was found that students who were committed to the content of the study programme, its academic culture, and their career interests, were more likely to complete their study programme than students who had low commitment or career interests (Mäkinen et al. 2004).

MCAST as a Case Study – An Analysis of Dropouts Carried Out from 2017 till 2020

A qualitative and quantitative analysis of MCAST students who decided to disengage and leave tertiary education was carried out. The research was conducted as part of the European Project ESF.02.058: “Adding Value: Nurturing Learning Journeys in IVET at MCAST” so as to identify the challenges and barriers youngsters encounter in their educational journey and help in the creation of a long-term structure for the benefit of students of Level 3 and below, between the years 2017 and 2020.

MCAST as Vocational Education Institute

MCAST is the leading vocational education provider in Malta. The main aim of MCAST is ‘(t) o provide universally accessible vocational and professional education and training with
an international dimension, responsive to the needs of the individual and the economy’ (‘MCAST Mission Statement’, n.d.). It also aims to give additional support to those students who are at risk or at a high risk of leaving the educational system.

**Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis**

The aim of this research study is targeted towards students who have dropped out during the last few years prior to completing the course. The purpose is to better understand the challenges, barriers, and issues that students faced and which led them to dropping out.

The information pertaining to the ex-students was forwarded from the registrar’s office, together with the necessary demographic and contact information. An online form was also created to enable researchers to quickly take note of the information being given and keep tabs of each student’s response in a clear and organised way. Phone interviews were carried out during September-December 2020, and targeted all the students from all levels and institutions who had dropped out of MCAST during the scholastic years 2017-2018, 2018-2019, and 2019-2020. It is important to note that the scholastic year of 2019-2020 was plagued by Covid-19 and thus may have had an influence on numbers and students. It is also important to note that during the academic year 2017-2018, industrial actions took place at MCAST, which also involved lecturers, and this might have also influenced students’ responses.

**Methodology**

A descriptive research study design that made use of total population sampling—a type of purposive sampling—was composedt of students who were once enlisted at MCAST but decided to drop out before completing the course they were signed up for. The aim of the study was primarily to understand the reasons and motivations that led youngsters to drop out of MCAST. This study also plays a role as a tracer study and identifies what the respondents have done since dropping out of MCAST and what their intentions are. Students who had dropped out from all the levels and all institutes during the three academic years—2017-2018, 2018-2019, and 2019-2020—were included in our population.

A phone interview questionnaire was designed, in both the Maltese and English languages, with a set of questions aimed at gathering information about the ex-students’ past MCAST experience, what led them to sign up to MCAST and later drop out, as well as to enquire about their current and potentially future status. It also sought to find out their opinions and suggestions as to what could be improved.

The phone interviews were organised according to a timeline, and the questions asked focused on:

| Before MCAST | • Their previous scholastic experiences  
|             | • The specific reason as to why they chose to enrol at MCAST |
| During MCAST | • What were their experiences when they were studying at MCAST  
|             | • What were the reasons that led to the decision of leaving |
| After MCAST  | • How they felt and what they did right after dropping out |
| Current      | • Current status |
| Changes      | • Suggestions for improvements |
Upon responding, participants were briefed about the purpose of the study and asked specifically whether they were willing to participate in the study. They were also told that the phone call would not be recorded and that the information and opinions they express will be treated in a confidential manner and would be anonymised. It was pointed out that participation in the study was on a voluntary basis and they could withdraw at any time.

The data received was analysed via qualitative and quantitative methods. Data was extracted from the online form and used to aid researchers and subsequently analysed. Each question on the online form had a checklist of possible answers that were the most common and pertinent according to research done in relation to the question at hand. Researchers also had an option called other so as to take note of any answers that differed from the ones in the checklist, but also to write down any comments and information the participants shared with the researcher pertaining to the research in question.

The qualitative analysis was done in a thematic manner by two researchers in order to verify and compare that the same codes, themes, and topics emerged, when analysed by different people. This was also done to ensure more validity and reliability.

**Results**

**3.1 Demographic Data**

There were 930 responses in total out of 1770 students who had dropped out in 2017-2018, 2018-2019, and 2019-2020. The majority of the students were attending Level 3. According to demographic data, 557 respondents were male, 372 were females, and 1 who identified as other. The prevalent majority (N=885) were Maltese and the highest number of response rates were from students who had followed courses within the Institute of Community Services (ICS).

It should be noted that males have a higher rate of leaving studies compared to females. With regard to the question as to males being a minority compared to women population, as per the study of Severiens and Dam (2012), this requires further analysis and collection of data per class. It is also to be noted though that although the majority of the students who leave higher education are male, it seems that for the Institute of Community Services (ICS), the majority of the dropouts from Level 3 were females.

A further analysis of the data showed that there is a significant positive change from 2017 to 2020, where the number of dropouts has decreased in most of the institutes. It is also important to note that students had to contend with the Covid-19 pandemic during the academic year 2019-2020 and this in itself could have influenced the data. A further analysis as the reason that led students to leave is based on the results received from the online forms and the phone interviews.

**3.2 MCAST Students’ Scholastic Experiences Before Entering MCAST**

Students were asked to describe their schooling experiences prior to enrol at MCAST. The overall number of students who said that their schooling was a positive experience overall was substantially higher as compared to those who stated it was a negative experience. It is interesting to point out that some of the respondents did not focus on their primary/secondary education but rather mentioned previous colleges that they had attended and experienced. When students stated that their schooling was not a pleasant experience for them, they were further asked as to why they believed so. Their replies are outlined in Table 1.
### Family issues
- Family issues

### Felt misunderstood
- Learning difficulties
- Undiagnosed and incorrect labelling
- Misunderstood

### Personal circumstances and mental health
- Lack of self-esteem
- Mental health issues

### Teachers/educators
- Ignored by teachers
- Preferential treatment
- Unfair practices at school
- Teacher labelling
- Picked on by teachers

### Bullying and influence of peers
- Bullying
- Bullying leading to absenteeism
- Picked on by teachers and students
- Bullying because of family name

### Influence of peers
- Peer pressure
- Other students made the experience negative
- Students who were all over the place led others astray and who in turn eventually became like them

### Lack of interest and poor academic performance
- No interest in school
- Weak in maths
- Poor academic performance

### Issues with the scholastic system
- Overwhelmed at university
- Stress and pressure
- System based on academia not skills and values

**Table 1:** Themes that emerged after students stated they had negative scholastic experiences prior to MCAST

#### 3.2.1 The Influence of Human Interaction In An Educational context

The most common elements that emerged when asking this question was the one of human interaction and how this type of interaction can influence one’s scholastic experience and journey. The most popular answers in fact related to how students felt that they were bullied or had been influenced by peers in a certain way. For some of the pupils, these interactions eventually led to more serious issues, with some mentioning absenteeism and mental health. Other students mentioned how they were affected by peer pressure whilst others mentioned that they were eventually influenced and led astray by peers who were not focused on school. Bullying however, was not limited just to peers, as some respondents felt that they were picked on by teachers. Some students stated that they felt ignored and misunderstood by their educators, whilst others felt that there was preferential treatment happening in class and unfair practices happening in school. Another individual brought up the influence of family issues.
3.2.2 Stress and Pressure

Stress and pressure were also factors that were given as a reply by students when they referred to their scholastic experiences prior to MCAST. Participants mentioned that feelings related to stress or pressure were evident, stating that they felt misunderstood by their educators, especially in cases involving learning difficulties.

Some individuals also felt negatively towards their previous educational experiences, because they were academically weak and thus eventually lost interest in school. Others had no interest in school from the beginning. Personal and health issues, such as mental health and low self-esteem, were also described as negative contributing factors. Other issues pertained to the scholastic system per se, with some viewing it as catering solely to academia and not giving the necessary attention to learning skills or values. Others on the other hand felt stressed, overwhelmed, and pressured with the sheer amount of work that was mandated, particularly at university level.

3.2.3 Reasons for Enrolling At MCAST

There were five main reasons that respondents stated led them to enrol at MCAST. The first reason, with 398 responses was that, MCAST, as a vocational education institute, offered more hands-on learning and activities. Many stated that they prefer learning by acting and that it was their style of learning, and thus MCAST seemed to be the ideal place for them (Figure 1).
Figure 1: A hierarchical depiction of the top 5 reasons as to why participants chose to enrol at MCAST

The second-most common response, expressed by more than a third of the respondents, 307, was that they chose MCAST because it offered the course of study that they desired.

The third most common reason chosen by participants was that MCAST offered the possibility of starting courses that commenced from a lower level or gave them the option to enter the educational setting with less prior qualifications than any other higher level institution in Malta. Some stated that they had no O-levels but could still be enrolled at a lower level with the possibility to progress. Others stated that MCAST was their alternative option, in case they did not have the necessary qualifications to enter any other higher educational institutions, such as university.

The fourth most common response chosen by respondents, approximately 75, was that they chose MCAST because they felt it was better suited for them. Some believed 1.) it harboured an inclusive community, and was more creative and accepting; 2.) that it was renowned as being a good college; 3.) that they agreed with the system implemented; 4.) that they believed it had smaller classes and less students; 5.) that it had a new style of teaching compared to mainstream schooling; 6.) that it provided more study and work opportunities; 7) and that it offered full-time education free of charge. Many stated that they felt MCAST to have been a `natural choice'.

The fifth most common response chosen by the participants was that they chose MCAST to find a job and better career prospect.
In fifth place, comprising 39 participants, was the response that such students chose MCAST because they believed it would help them in finding better job opportunities and careers. Others, particularly mature students, chose MCAST with the intention of upgrading themselves educationally on a professional career level.

Other reasons for enrolling that generated fewer responses are included in Figure 2 in an ordinal way.

![Figure 2: Other reasons why students chose to enrol at MCAST](image)

### 3.3 The Impressions and Experiences of Youngsters+ at MCAST

#### 3.3.1 The MCAST Experience

Participants were asked to describe and define their experience during their vocational study path. More than half of the participants, as per Figure 3 below, stated that their experience at MCAST was a good one.
Students mentioned that they had a positive experience during their studying period in class, that lecturers were helpful, supportive etc., that they made new friends and met new people, and that the lessons/courses at MCAST were interesting. Overall, they believed that MCAST had a positive learning environment and that apprenticeships would have an added impact on their employment opportunities.

3.3.2 Leaving MCAST

Participants were asked if it was their decision to leave MCAST. From the samples received, 910 respondents stated that it was their decision to leave, while 2% said that it was not their decision, as shown in Figure 4.
Respondents were asked to give a reason as to why they chose to leave their studies. The most common answers given were ‘Schooling and educators’ and ‘Money and work’ (Figure 5).

**Figure 5:** Chart outlining checklist answers and other (comments)

Other topics that were brought up as reasons for why students left MCAST include issues related to:

- Bullying/racism/sexism
- Family and personal issues
- Stress and pressure
- Issues with peers
- Mental health and personal confidence
- Change of career path
- Work opportunities taken
- Change of course
- Travelling
- Finances
- Covid-19

The most common responses fell in the category relating to preferring or needing to work instead of continuing with the course, followed by comments related to wanting a different career path or a change in course.

**3.3.2.1 To Work..... To Study... To Change**

**Financial Issues and Work Opportunities**

Many of the students specified that they chose work instead of studying because they needed the money. One reason that was mentioned often was that they had to leave their studies because of family and financial reasons. Others also mentioned that work was a necessity and thus it was hard for them to balance working and studying at the same time.
Similarly, others stated that they could not follow the schedule of the curriculum due to their fixed working hours; consequently, they had to abandon their studies.

A substantial number of respondents stated that they were offered a good working opportunity, while others just preferred to work instead of study. It is also important to note that many of the respondents also stated that the apprenticeship location they were at offered them a post.

**Change of Career or Course**

Many respondents stated that the main reason they left was that they wanted to change their course after they realised it was not what they wanted. Others noted that they felt they needed to change path and choose a different career. Others stated that they lost interest in their original course that led them to think they needed to re-evaluate their career choices, especially after they were on a placement or apprenticeship. Others felt that by changing course they were giving themselves new work opportunities.

### 3.3.2.2 Schooling and Educators

Those participants that chose ‘schooling and educators’ as their reason to leave MCAST were further prompted so as to narrow down the specific issue. Figure 6 depicts the reasons for leaving college, wherein lack of employment seems to have the highest responses from the predefined checklist. The majority of the students, though, gave a reply which was not included in the initial checklist and was instead included in the questionnaire under the option ‘Other’.

Figure 7 illustrates the ‘Other’ issues.

**Figure 6**: Reasons for leaving related to schooling and educator checklist and other comments
The most common reasons were that 1.) the course did not meet their expectations; 2.) the course was difficult for them to attend or that they struggled; 3.) students realised that they want to change career or that the course they chose was not the correct one for them; 4.) they lost interest in general; 5.) issues with educators.

**Figure 7:** Other reasons for leaving related to school and educators

### 3.3.2.3 Course Expectations and Losing Interest

Many students stated that they felt there was a big discrepancy between how they imagined the course would be and the eventual reality. Some also mentioned that the way the course was presented and the idea behind it did not tally with reality, which made them have doubts in relation to work opportunities. Some respondents also specified they had higher academic expectations and the courses...
that they were following were not what they expected to be. Others indicated that the course they were following was very generic and repetitive.

Many of the respondents also stated that they lost complete interest in their studies which eventually led them to miss classes or look at other opportunities.

3.4 Life After MCAST

Participants were asked about how they felt right after leaving their studies. More than half of the respondents stated that they felt fine. Figure 8 presents the replies received by the students.

![Figure 8: Responses based on a checklist that outline how participants felt when they left vocational education](image)

3.4.1 Leaving Vocational Education, Right or Wrong Decision

A very interesting outcome was that the respondents expressed different emotions in relation to their decision to leave their studies. 28% of the participants commented that they felt disappointed because they left without completing the course and not gaining any qualifications. Many expressed how much they would have wished to have completed the course. Others said that it was the best decision for them, but that nevertheless, there is still that lingering regret of not having finished what they had started.

Others commented that they felt happy because they had less pressure and stress once they stopped attending their course. Most stated that they felt relieved and liberated. Others stated that they were just excited and eager to start a new challenge and chapter in their life. Some knew that they wanted to attend a different school, try a new course, or try and gain different qualifications, while others had a plan in mind for their future and thus felt motivated and enthusiastic to put it into action.
All categories that emerged from the comments are depicted in figure 9.

**Figure 9:** Main categories that emerged from comments pertaining to how students felt after leaving MCAST

### 3.4.2 What Did You Do After Leaving Vocational Education?

In the question as to what they did after leaving MCAST, the majority of respondents stated that they started looking for a job.
From the replies, it emerged that most of the participants that dropped out started working immediately. Others stated that they had chosen to start studying elsewhere or they had continued working at the same job placement which they had been enrolled during their vocational studies at MCAST.

3.5 Current Living Situation

3.5.1 Current Situation

Respondents were asked about their current living situation. Figure 11 illustrates the replies of the participants. The vast majority of respondents replied that they are currently working, followed by those who stated that they were currently studying. Figure 12 illustrates what paths participants followed after leaving MCAST.
Dropping Out from Post-Secondary Vocational Education: A Case Study in Malta

What is your current situation?

- Working, 749
- Studying, 232
- Thinking about studying again, 97
- Searching for a job, 37
- Nothing / unemployed and not studying, 38

**Figure 11:** Checklist of responses as to what respondents are doing currently

**Figure 12:** Different locations participants have opted to continue their studies at after dropping out from MCAST
4. What could have been done in a different way

The participants were also asked to respond to an open-ended question related to recommendations as to what kind of changes they would like to have had during their vocational education path and which could have stopped them from leaving their studies. More specifically, they were asked what they would have liked MCAST to change and address when they were students. This was an open-ended question and therefore the students were invited to share their opinion.

The majority of respondents, N=328, answered that they would not change anything and that in their opinion everything was fine. Many stated that in their case the reason for leaving was personal and that it did not have anything to do with the MCAST institution per se. Some took personal responsibility, saying that it was their fault for choosing the wrong course, while others stated that it was they themselves who were the issue rather than MCAST.

Some students mentioned that there was a lack of support from lecturers on an individual basis, as well as regards writing and structuring assignments. Another issue which was pointed out was that there were issues with classmates and that there was not enough class control enforced by the lecturer, something which created an unpleasant and stressful situation. Other issues which were having a negative impact were related to course expectations and administration procedures.

The absence of online courses or the option of part-time instead of full-time courses was also an issue for those who wanted to study and work in parallel. Many students also pointed out that, from an administrative point of view, during the application stage, they should have been guided better and had more information about the course beforehand, such as the number of hours involved, type of placements, hours of placements, etc.

Analysis

According to the analysis of the data, it can be seen that most of the students who attended MCAST believe that it was a positive experience.

Starting from the main reasons as to why students chose to attend vocational studies, one can see that students had a defined idea of what they wanted to study and what vocational education is. They wanted to study more practical hands-on courses rather than just theoretical ones. These were students who started attending with a definite purpose, that is, that of completing their tertiary education. However, the results of 930 responses from a total of 1770 students that had dropped out during 2017-2018, 2018-2019, and 2019-2020 showed that students decided to redirect their goals and leave vocational tertiary education. The responses which were given during the interviews are similar to the reasons which are being described in the relevant literature. As was outlined in introduction, there are different factors that contribute to students’ decisions to leave their studies. These factors are related to family background, the financial situation of students, their prior education, their expectations, motivation, and satisfaction with their studies, etc.

Financial issues, along with a lack of motivation for studies, are two very strong factors that lead students to drop out from higher education. An issue which is affecting MCAST is the number of students who are offered full-time work by their placement or apprenticeship position before they finish their course. Students cannot easily reject opportunities and, as such, are often disengaging from their studies so as to follow a career path.
With regard to expectations, students usually define it as another crucial factor that leads them to drop out from their studies. Their argument is based on the fact that they had different expectations for the course, that the content of the course is poor in relation to modern technology, or that there might also be issues with lecturers or classmates. Vocational alternatives were in fact listed as the major reason that students felt that they should leave, as they felt that the course did not sufficiently and practically relate with what they wanted to do. In other cases, they realised that the career they wanted to undertake was not what they expected and thus needed to look elsewhere. This also re-emerged under a different facet, when students picked schooling and education as their main decision to leave. It is a possibility that student perceptions and interpretations of course descriptions might have been misinterpreted, leading them to reset their goals and set new career targets.

Psychological factors are also crucial elements in the decision to drop out. In the literature, it is stated that stress or a broad mix of stressor factors can create difficulties for students’ adaptation to vocational education or higher educational studies in general. Indeed, some of the students described that the stress that they felt during their studies made them reconsider their academic future.

Below is a list of recommendations that could possibly solve some of the issues that emerged, some of which are suggestions from students themselves.

**Recommendations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Content of the Course                    | • To be presented in an audio-visual manner to reach as many prospective students as possible  
• Class material and delivery should reflect exactly what was promised in the course description. This should also include the type of apprenticeship/placement they should expect, what type of work can be achieved from the course, minimum hours of hands-on experience per course, if it will include any core or extra-curricular subjects that are mandatory, etc.  
• Promote even further the information talks that are given on courses every year |
| • Course vs reality and expectations       | • The content of the course should follow current technology and trends       |
| • Assignment and support of students       | • Assignment titles and due dates to be given out early in the course so students can manage time effectively  
• Support students in managing their time   |
| • Stressful factors                        | • Students should be in contact with counsellors or professionals that can help them to deal with their varied situations |
| • Lack of hangout spaces to spend free time on campus | • More available areas to hang out, spend free time and free lessons on campus. Additional green areas, benches, sports courts, pop-up tents, events |
Youngsters who struggle academically in classes
Basic skills preparation for work lessons

Promote services given by LSU so that students can ask for support

Services offered in campus

More awareness of services via posters, freshers’ week, referrals by lecturers, mentors

Students dropping out due to other commitments (family, work issues)

Hybrid learning to have a mixture of face-to-face and online lectures
Short part-time courses should be offered that relate directly to what the industry needs
Short modules that can be taken separately to accumulate credits for a full qualification. This would make it more possible for some students to maintain a work-life balance compared to when a full course is done. Furthermore, students can schedule when to start following a module in their own time

Financial constraints

Increase the ceiling of the number of hours that can be worked part-time without relinquishing stipend

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to present the factors that lead students to leave tertiary education. The factors can be analysed according to different categories related to family, school, individual factors, socioeconomic problems, as well as gender, psychological, and behavioural aspects. Personal challenges, lack of support, family issues, and stress are all factors that have a negative impact on the learning path of students. Through the analysis of the data that was gathered from the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology and which was used as the basis of this case study, it was shown that the results are similar to the ones referred to in the literature. The results were analysed and recommendations were suggested.

An interesting outcome from this research carried out at MCAST was that most of the students who dropped out between the years 2017-2020 did not have a grudge against MCAST, which shows that they are either re-enrolled or want to re-enrol. This was also evident when students were asked what MCAST could change when they were at the college, with the vast majority stating that MCAST did not need to change anything. This does not exclude the fact that there were, however, students who felt that improvements were needed. In fact, many stated that they had different expectations in relation to the content of the course, whereas some others mentioned that there were too many subjects that did not pertain to their chosen subject of study.

Although there are many different factors that lead a student to decide to drop out, it should be emphasised that the development of a procedure or tools to identify students at risk of dropping out as early as possible is essential. This suggestion is based on the outcome of the research, wherein, many students replied that they regraded for their decision to leave their studies, and they would be willing to return and conclude them. By developing the proper tools to support them, we could probably reduce the risk of dropouts. Students have to realise that they are not alone in this academic journey and...
there are methods and techniques that can help them, as well as prevent them from leaving higher education.

According to David Nkengbeza (2017), there are tools which are being used in the Finnish educational system to prevent students from dropping out. The conceptual framework for preventing student dropouts, such as engaging and forming a partnership with parents, looking for warning signs, making learning relevant and the classroom environments safe, as well as embracing a student-centred funding model, are used. Another tool is the creation of a safe school environment, cooperative learning, and good classroom management. This will make learning enjoyable and help to keep students in school (Furger 2013).

Although it is a challenge to bring back to academia the students who have disengaged, the overall objective of the research aims to support students and help them to be re-enrolled in their learning path.

Acknowledgments

This paper is supported by the European Union through the European Social fund under ESF. 02.058 - Adding Value: Nurturing Learning Journeys in IVET at MCAST.

References


Dropping Out from Post-Secondary Vocational Education: A Case Study in Malta


