

# Are exams failing?

As students and parents wait anxiously for results of the summer resists, university science lecturer and specialist in assessment, Dr **DEBORAH CHETCUTI**, speaks to **Gillian Bartolo** about the problems concerning MATSEC

*There is a lot of criticism about MATSEC. What do you think?*

One of the main problems I see in MATSEC is that administration takes predominance over the academic. The major concern is getting exams published, getting students to sit for exams. But I feel there isn't much concern about the consequences of exams on students. My chief concern is the student, as exams and assessment have a great impact on the lives of students.

We need to make a distinction between assessment and exams. Exams should be only one aspect of assessment. Assessment is a whole range of methods for collecting information about the performance of students and evaluating our courses. Traditionally, in Malta, the emphasis has been on exams. In the so-called formative method of teaching which I prefer, assessment is used to improve the learning of students; feedback is provided on how students are getting on, strengths and weaknesses are indicated and students are shown how they can improve. In the summative method of assessment - the exam - a final judgement is made, a grade is given. This is what happens when students sit for exams. SEC categorises and labels students. This is one of the main criticisms I would make of exams.

*Are you suggesting that exams should be scrapped?*

What has been suggested in the National Minimum Curriculum is to make assessment more formative using two methods: profiles and portfolios. Formative assessment should become part of pedagogy (the teaching method), through tests, homework, projects, questions, so that during the year the student is constantly being assessed. SEC should remain but it should be only one aspect of the certificate the student ends up with. The student should finish school with a portfolio containing the results of his teachers' assessments of his work from as early as Form 1. Included in the portfolio should also be examples of the student's work.

In the current system the future of students depends solely on the SEC grades which do not actually show what the student knows, but only how good his or her memory is. It should test skills like problem solving, and students' ideas. The emphasis on final exams is reflected in the



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teaching, as students are taught simply to pass exams. They tend to assimilate only the information they need for the exams. There is no deeper understanding of a subject.

*How does the emphasis on exams affect students?*

What I find worrying and our emphasis on exams is the kind of disillusionment it creates in the students who don't pass. This is especially evident in our area secondary schools where students start off with a sense of failure. You find so many talented children at secondary schools and these talents are lost because we form our judgements only on the grades that students get. I used to teach at an area secondary school. Students arrived there disheartened because they had failed their Junior Lyceum exams. They were loath to sit for SEC exams because they had obtained low marks. I found that in fact if you looked at students individually they did manage to live up to expectations in the classroom. For example, many of my students could understand science concepts very well and explain things very well orally, but they performed badly in written exams. One of the reasons was their lack of English language skills. Sometimes they

couldn't read the paper or their English wasn't good enough to express themselves in writing. Exams test only one kind of knowledge and we now know that students learn in different ways, and absorb information in different ways.

*How can MATSEC be improved?*

It needs better funding for a start. Otherwise, my major criticism has always been the division of the exams into A and B papers. Students have to decide which paper to sit for a long time before they actually take the exam. Making the choice creates a lot of pressure on students and parents. The idea behind the two papers was to provide exams for all students since previously the exams only catered for the top 20 per cent of students. So in the current system you have a core Paper 1 which all students sit for and then students choose between paper 2A which is more difficult and paper 2B which is less difficult than the core paper. The exams are graded from 1 to 7. If you choose Paper A you can get from Grade 1 to Grade 4 or remain Unclassified. The problem with this is that students who fail in paper A could have attained a Grade 5 if they chose paper B. A Grade 5 gets you into post-secondary school. If you choose paper B, you can only get between 4 and 7 or remain Unclassified. Grades 4 and 5 get you into post-secondary education. Grades 6 and 7 give you a certificate but without being eligible to go to university. So the only common grade to the two papers is Grade 4. The University Senate has recently approved plans for Grades 4 and 5 to overlap.

*How do students from different schools perform in this system?*

The best results in SEC are obtained by students who attend

Church schools. These are the students who are most likely to opt for paper A papers. From my research on the Physics SEC examination it emerges that there is a clear difference in the choice of papers made by pupils in different schools. My research was conducted between 1994 and 1996 when there was no data on children sitting for SECs at private schools. Grace Grima has done more recent research. My findings cannot be generalised to all subjects, but it does raise questions. Students from Church schools opted more for Paper A because they saw it as more prestigious. My findings about Church schools were not that surprising because Church schools tended to cream off the best students.

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What is surprising is that whereas you would expect most Junior Lyceum students to sit for Paper A, in fact most opt for Paper B to play safe. I think the difference has to do with the different ethos of the school, and also class difference. When I conducted my research, students who had entered through the ballot system had not yet reached Form 5. It would be interesting to see if the ballot system changes things. The attitude of Junior Lyceum students when I conducted my research was

that they were happy as long as they got their SECs, and didn't care about excelling.

I also found in my research that teachers found it difficult to advise students what paper to sit for. They were perfectly capable of gauging the level of their students, but advising them to sit for Paper A was a risk. What if they had an off day, or were sick? Advising them to take an A paper might be condemning them to a U.

*So would you say that the intention for which the A and B system was set up has failed?*

In my opinion it has. It is labelling students rather than helping them, and it is not bringing out their potential.

*What is the solution?*

One exam is not enough. I would have a whole range of assessments as I have already said. And I would have a single paper with a wide variety of questions, not simply easy questions and difficult ones, but ones testing different skills, with space for practical questions and oral questions.

*If you based results on teacher assessments, how could you be sure they were fair?*

The teachers would be given the marking criteria beforehand and moderators would go round the school throughout the year to check standards were being kept. Ideally, the process of assessing and checks would go on throughout the year so that examiners would go into the schools and work with the teachers.

*How much contact is there between teachers in the school and the actual MATSEC Board?*

There is very little contact between them. There should be more discussion meetings where syllabus panels and marker panels could actually meet teachers. As it is teachers are represented on panels but otherwise the only way they communicate is through reports to schools. There are no meetings with marker panels to explain why they have marked the way they have or for teachers to make suggestions or objections. To be fair MATSEC is now trying to organise more of these meetings.

*Many people complain that the exam questions are not always clear.*

Examiners try to make questions as fair as possible. The problem is that there isn't a pool of questions for examiners to use. Each question is prepared for the first time before the exam session, and the questions are not tested out: they are not piloted because of a fear of leakage, which forms part of the whole obsession with secrecy. In other countries they have a data bank of questions collected from every teacher and built up over the years. The questions are tested in the classroom over the years, which gives an indication of how clear the question is. It has been said that the difficulty lies in building up a data bank. But the real reason is that we are still not ready to set exam questions that have already appeared somewhere. If you're not trying to catch out students, but out to test what they can do, it shouldn't matter if they've done the question before.