

## **Attitudes Towards New Vocational and Traditional Academic Further and Higher Education Institutions in Malta: A Study of the Effects of Social Class**

**Francesca Mizzi-Caruana**

Malta College of Arts, Science & Technology

**Matthew Muscat-Inglott**

Malta College of Arts, science & Technology

matthew.muscat.inglott@mcast.edu.mt

**Renzo Kerr-Cumbo**

Malta College of Arts, Science & Technology

**Abstract:** By differentiating public perceptions of relatively new vocational institutions from those of more traditional forms of academic further and higher education, the study aimed to explore how attitudes vary as a function of social class in Malta. A survey of 573 adults was carried out to measure variations in attitude towards three specific Maltese state-sponsored further and higher education institutions, two vocational, and one traditionally academic. Framed conceptually according to a critical interpretation of the parity of esteem debate, the main dependent variable was defined in terms of difference in attitudes toward the new vocational, as opposed to traditional academic institutions. One-way analysis of variance was carried out to explore these differences according to self-identified social class, as well as socioeconomic markers including income, education level and occupation. The findings revealed small but statistically significant effects of self-identified social class, income and level of education. As social class and other socioeconomic values increase, positive perceptions of vocational as opposed to academic tracks, tend to decrease. No significant effect emerged with respect to occupation type. In this article, we discuss some of the implications of these findings for Maltese further and higher education providers from a critical theoretical perspective. Furthermore, we argue that arbitrary prestige-attribution to specific institutions reduces qualifications to mere referents of otherwise fixed social status, and more broadly undermines the prospect of a truly meritocratic society.

**Keywords:** Vocational education and training, further and higher education, attitudes, perceptions, Malta

## Introduction

The main aim of the study was to explore the relationship between attitudes towards vocational education and social class in Malta. Members of a society generally identify with a given social class based at least in part on measurable conditions like income, education level and type of occupation (Easterbrook et al., 2020). In this article the term socioeconomic status (SES) is used to refer specifically to these three factors collectively, while *social class* is used to reference those fundamental social groupings with which people subjectively self-identify (Rubin et al., 2014). The idea of social class also presupposes that certain attitudes, assumptions and behaviours are adopted by distinctive social groups (Manstead, 2018). Sociologists have conceptualised the general structure of Maltese social class using various frameworks, most notably, those rooted in the Marxist and Weberian traditions. Both have provided valuable insights for understanding how Maltese society is structured (Sultana, 1991; 1997). As one might expect from a Weberian perspective for instance, there is a tendency to identify with certain social groupings on the basis of differentiated status, prestige, and shared characteristics, that do not necessarily depend on ownership of the means of production. Yet, as a result of inevitable development of material inequalities, some degree of class conflict results, as one might recognise from a Marxist viewpoint.

Baldacchino (1993) described how “status exhibitionism” can sometimes manifest when members of a society seek to advertise their association with groups of apparently high relative prestige. It is up to individual members of the society, in this view, to personally accrue the status symbols they need to identify with a maximally prestigious class. One such status symbol available to members of Maltese society looking to exercise upward social mobility, is education. According to Mayo (2021), education has become wedded to a market ideology, becoming a *consumable* good rather than a *public* good in the neoliberal age. Educational products and services are thereby available for consumption by individuals attempting to maximise their own human capital potential, and successfully initiate upward social mobility. Local and international scholars, however, have long argued that instead of facilitating large-scale social mobility in any meaningful or systemic way, education instead tends to reproduce existing social divisions and inequalities (Baldacchino, 1993). Examples of upward social mobility resulting from education, in this sense, tend to be the exceptions, and not the norm.

Since joining the Bologna process in 1999, Malta has participated in increasing standardisation of further and higher education along with much of the rest of Europe. A market dynamic was introduced to the organisation and provision of further and higher education, leading to a proliferation of education providers offering higher qualifications at levels previously the sole reserve of

the University of Malta (UM), which is the oldest higher education institution on the islands. MCAST, which is the largest state-sponsored alternative to UM in the provision of further and higher education, takes the form of a “new” or “technical” university, and offers degrees up to doctoral level. The Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) has similarly evolved from a further to a higher education institution offering Bachelor’s and Master’s degree programmes. Higher education qualifications from such vocational institutions are, in the eyes of the Maltese and European qualifications frameworks (MQF/EQF), at par with those offered at UM. This means that more inclusive approaches to admissions at VET institutions represent an opportunity to pursue a complete further and higher educational pathway for those students who would not have otherwise been granted access. If education is really a vehicle of social mobility, then such educational pathways should by default also lead up the social ladder.

To the contrary, critical scholars argue that VET has instead traditionally served as a channeling system, directing youths from working class backgrounds into traditionally working class occupations, thereby reproducing socioeconomic inequalities across generations (Clarke & Winch, 2007; Claus, 1990; Wheelehan, 2015). In Malta, for instance, publicly available data show that students from the Southern Harbour region, which is the lowest ranking region in terms of socioeconomic markers like average income, average property price, risk of poverty and crime, are over-represented at MCAST, and under-represented at UM (Muscat-Inglott, 2021). The long-standing issue of achieving parity of esteem (Parkes, 1993), in this sense, is problematic. If VET institutions actually end up channeling learners into the subservient class of a fixed social structure, duly unequipped to challenge the social and political status quo, then what are the real motives for overly enthusiastic promotion of VET, and associated promises of parity of esteem?

According to James Relly (2021), true parity of esteem remains actively undermined by existing social structures, rendering it little more than a form of political rhetoric. Despite the existence of stigma surrounding trade schools and other vocationally-oriented modes of education and training at least among certain segments of the population (Cedefop, 2011; Said, 2020), many working class parents wholeheartedly subscribe to the VET message. Overtly dismissive attitudes towards the theoretical and seemingly impractical nature of academic education among working class parents have the effect of encouraging children and youngsters to pursue VET as a practical route into safe and immediate employment, resulting in the reproduction of values across generations (Claus, 1990). It is likely, therefore, that variations in attitudes towards further and higher education in terms of the vocational and academic tracks, significantly vary as a function of social class. There is a lack of empirical evidence, however, to support this hypothesis. We aimed to explore, therefore, what are the attitudes towards new vocational as opposed to traditional

academic further and higher education institutions in Malta, and do they depend on social class and other associated markers of SES?

## Methodology

### *Data collection and variable set-up*

A survey study via online questionnaire with a frequentist statistical analysis of data was planned to address the above question. Ethical clearance was granted by the MCAST research ethics committee in September 2021, and a *Google Forms* questionnaire was created and circulated online until the end of the year. Using a convenience and opportunity sampling strategy, a total of 573 respondents eventually participated. Their mean age was 43.19 years ( $SD = 12.49$ ), and 65.4% were female. Figure 1 shows how the sample was further distributed by locality. Expected values are included in the chart to give an indication of the overall representativeness of the sample, and are based on the latest population census data from 2021 (NSO, 2023).

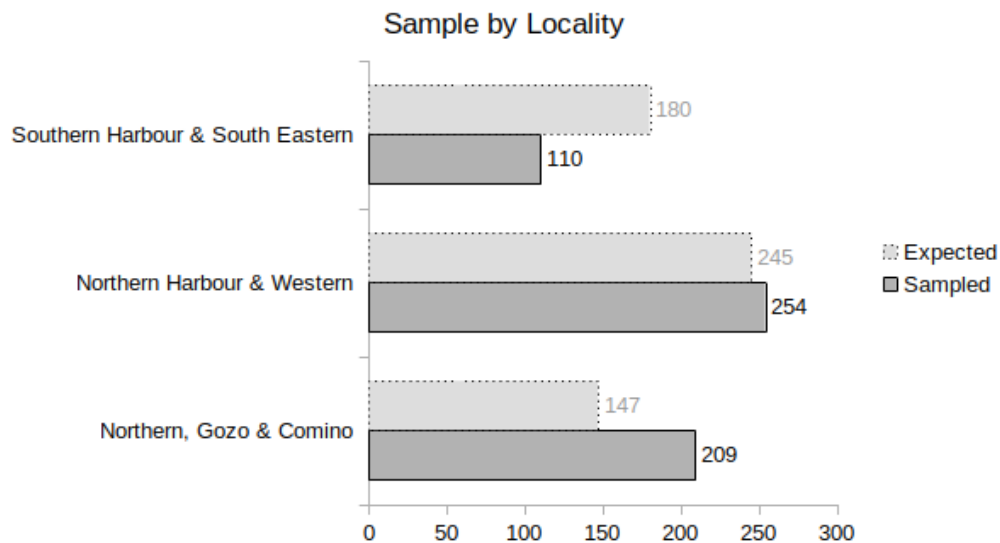


Figure 1: Sampled distributions by locality, with expected proportions according to latest population census data.

The remaining data related to the composition of the sample were treated as the main explanatory variables of the study. These included self-identified social class, personal income, household income, education level, and type of occupation. Sultana (1991) proposed the groupings of underclass, working class, petite bourgeoisie, bourgeoisie, and power elite as prospective categories for describing a general social class structure in Malta. These were represented in the present study as lower, working, middle, upper middle, and upper class, with a view to presenting participants with a clearer and more intuitive

selection of class descriptors. Figure 2 shows how the sample identified within this framework.

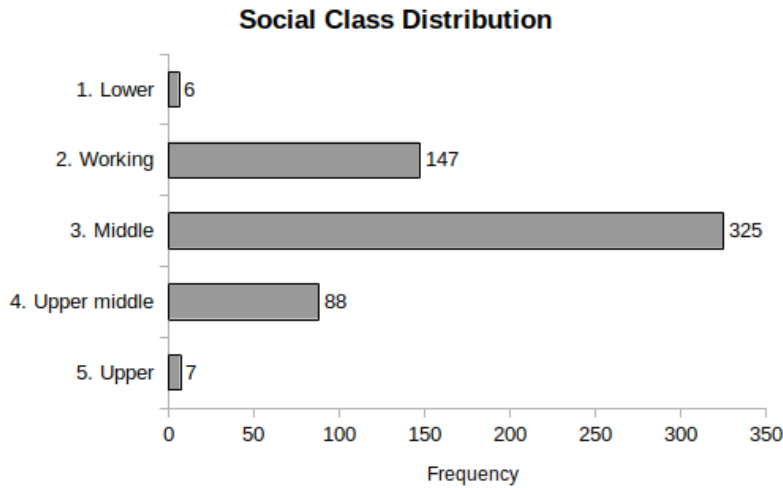


Figure 2: Frequencies for social classes

Income, education level and occupation were used as markers of SES. Gross personal income was measured using standard tax brackets, as shown in Table 1. Education was measured across three levels as shown in Table 2, namely, completion of compulsory, further or higher education.

Bracket	Personal	<i>n</i>	Household	<i>n</i>
1	0 – 760	68	0 – 1,050	47
2	761 – 1,200	73	1,051 – 1,800	77
3	1,201 – 1,625	118	1,801 – 2,400	108
4	1626 – 2,900	220	2,401 – 5,000	246
5	2,901 – 5,000	74	> 5,000	95
6	> 5,000	20		

Table 1: Frequencies for personal and household income brackets.

Category	Descriptor	MQE/EQF Level	<i>n</i>
1	Compulsory	< 4	39
2	Further	4 - 5	136
3	Higher	> 5	398

Table 2: Frequencies for personal education level.

Occupation was initially measured using the standard categories adopted by the National Statistics Office (NSO), but later reduced as shown in Figure 3, such that no single category contained less than 25 cases.

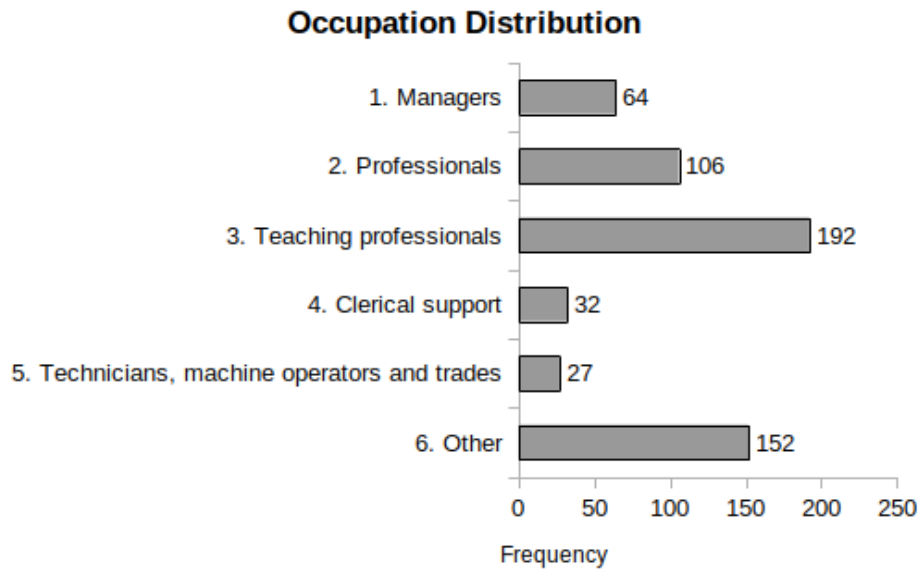


Figure 3: Frequencies per category of occupation.

To operationalise the main dependent variable of interest, a five-point Likert scale was used to quantify attitudes towards UM, MCAST and ITS across a seven-item scale (see Table 3). The labels “strongly disagree” (= 1) and “strongly agree” (= 5) accompanied the items, which were repeated for each of the three institutions. This resulted in a total of  $7 * 3 = 21$  items.

Items	Cronbach's Alpha		
	UM	MCAST	ITS
<b>As an institution, UM/MCAST/ITS ...</b>			
1			
2			
3			
4	<i>a</i> = .80	<i>a</i> = .90	
5			
6			
7			

Table 3: The seven items and their internal consistency as measures of attitudes towards UM and VET institutions.

These were later partitioned into batches of 7 and 14, as MCAST and ITS were summed to produce a combined VET score ( $VET_{Attitudes} = MCAST_{Attitudes} + ITS_{Attitudes}$ ). The statements themselves were developed by the researchers in a process designed to enhance face validity, and later tested for internal consistency using Cronbach's Alpha. The seven-item batch had good internal consistency in reference to  $UM_{Attitudes}$  ( $\alpha = .80$ ), and excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .90$ ) in reference to the combined  $VET_{Attitudes}$  score.

A new variable,  $y$ , was computed as the difference between VET and UM scores ( $y = VET_{Attitudes} - UM_{Attitude}$ ). This was based on the same logic as a  $t$  test on gain/change scores in the context of analysis of experimental data. The variable  $y$ , in this sense, denotes the difference between VET and UM in analogous fashion to the difference between post-test and pre-test scores in a randomised controlled trial. Attitudes towards VET ( $M = 3.95$ , 95% CI = 3.90, 3.99) were therefore considered in relation to baseline attitudes towards UM ( $M = 4.30$ , 95% CI = 4.26, 4.34), which was analogous to the consideration of post-test scores in relation to baseline pre-test scores.

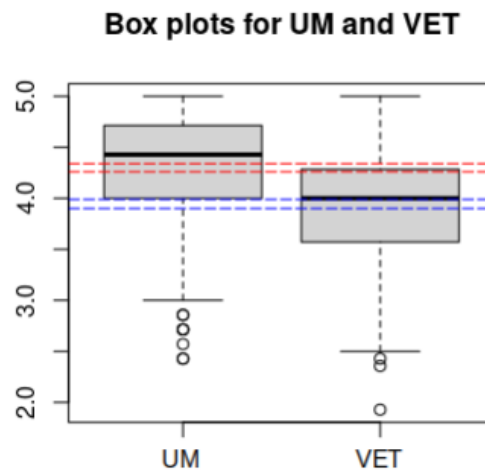


Figure 4: Box plots surrounding the median values for attitudes towards UM and VET, with 95% with non-overlapping intervals shown.

The non-overlapping 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) represented by the red and blue bands indicate a statistically significant difference between  $UM_{Attitude}$  and  $VET_{Attitude}$ , analogous to a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores in an experiment prior to factoring in treatment conditions (or any other explanatory variables of interest). The main dependent variable  $y$  was treated as normally distributed ( $Skewness = -.86$ ,  $Kurtosis = 1.62$ ).

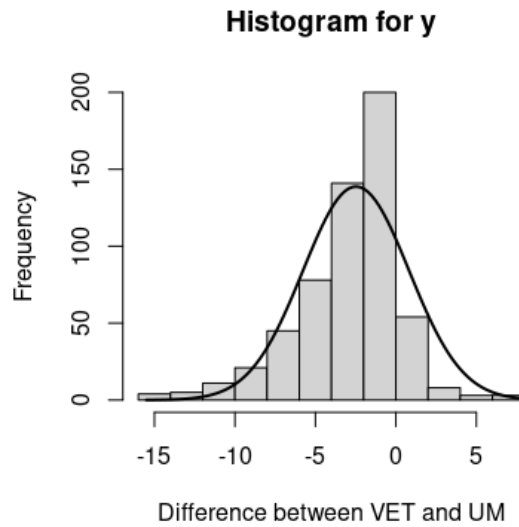


Figure 5: Histogram indicating an approximately normal distribution for  $y$ .

#### Data analysis

The data were sorted using open source spreadsheet software on a *Linux* operating system, and later imported into *R Studio* (v2022.07.2) open source statistical analysis software. Table 4 shows the main dependent and independent/explanatory variables that formed the basis of the analysis.

Variab le	Description	Type
1 ( $y$ )	Attitudes towards VET institutions, in relation to UM	Quantitative (Interval)
2	Social class (subjective self-identification)	Qualitative (5 categories)
3	SES (Own income)	Qualitative (6 categories)
4	SES (Household income)	Qualitative (5 categories)
5	SES (Education level)	Qualitative (3 categories)
6	SES (Occupation)	Qualitative (6 categories)

Table 4: Final variables for main hypotheses.

The five hypotheses shown in Table 5 were formulated to address the main research question. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was selected as a test of significance for variations in  $y$  across the levels of each independent variable. Initial testing showed that the variances across social class were not homogeneous, so the assumptions for ANOVA were not met in this case. The Kruskal-Wallis test was therefore selected instead as a non-parametric alternative for effects of social class. A confidence level of 95% was used ( $\alpha =$



.05) to reject the null hypotheses and infer statistical significance, according to normal social sciences convention for frequentist null-hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Levene's test for homogeneity of variance	Selected statistical procedure
$H_1$ Social class explains a significant amount of variation in attitudes to VET	$p < .01^*$	Kruskal Wallis
$H_2$ Own income explains a significant amount of variation in attitudes to VET	$p = .08$	One-way ANOVA
$H_3$ Household income explains a significant amount of variation in attitudes to VET	$p = .22$	One-way ANOVA
$H_4$ Education level explains a significant amount of variation in attitudes to VET	$p = .20$	One-way ANOVA
$H_5$ Occupation explains a significant amount of variation in attitudes to VET	$p = .25$	One-way ANOVA

Table 5: The five main hypotheses and their associated statistical tests.

## Results

Since  $y$  was operationalised as  $VET_{Attitude}$  less  $UM_{Attitude}$ , a positive value indicated preference for VET, and a negative value preference for UM. The mean value for  $y$  ( $M = -2.48$ ,  $SD = 3.29$ ,  $Min = -15.50$ ,  $Max = 8.00$ ) and 95% CI (-2.75, -2.21) showed that, on average, participants had an overall preference for UM, given the negative sign. Standard box plots detailing the hypothesis testing results are shown below, with the mean of  $y$  (or the "null model") added for reference. The box plots themselves are grouped according to the levels of each explanatory variable, and in standard fashion present the median, inter-quartile range (IQR), as well as minimum and maximum values. A box positioned relatively high indicates perceptions in favour of VET, while one positioned lower indicates less favourable attitudes toward VET (or more favourable attitudes toward UM).

### *Attitudes to education and social class*

$H_1$  was the main hypothesis of interest for determining variations in perceptions of VET according to social class. Given Levene's statistic was 6.59 ( $p < .001$ ), equality of variance across social groups could not be assumed. To avoid over-estimating the effect of social class, therefore, a non-parametric

(Kruskal-Wallis) procedure was selected to test the null hypothesis that social class and attitudes towards VET institutions as opposed to UM were unrelated. This was duly rejected ( $\chi^2 = 12.13, p = .02$ ), supporting the existence of a statistically significant association between social class and perceptions of VET. Spearman's correlation coefficient was calculated as a measure of effect size ( $r_s = -.14$ ), and showed the strength of association to be mild. Nevertheless, higher social class predicted increasingly positive attitudes towards UM, implying an element of status has been linked to traditionally academic further and higher education in Malta. Taking the square of the effect size into account, however, we can say that social class ultimately explains only a relatively low proportion ( $R^2 = .02$ ) of the total variation in the difference in attitudes towards VET institutions and UM. So while social class is a significant variable, the difference in attitudes is likely a complex phenomenon, and influenced by multiple additional factors.

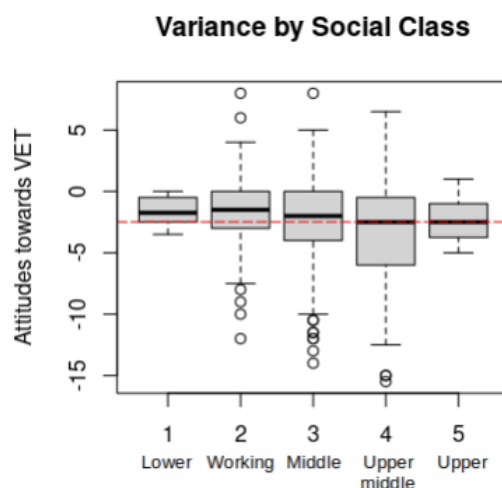


Figure 6: Visual analysis of variance by social class.

The median values in Figure 6 show a gradual decrease from left to right in positive perception of VET, as class rises. The widest gap was observed specifically between the working and upper middle classes. Indeed, additional post-hoc pairwise Mann-Whitney tests with a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level ( $\alpha = .005$ ), revealed the only statistically significant difference to be between these two particular groups ( $p = .001$ ). Applying Sultana's (1991) tentative model of Maltese social class structure, these categories represent the working class and bourgeoisie. The results accord with a Marxist view, in this sense, by inferring a degree of proletariat-bourgeoisie conflict, in spite of a general lack of collective class consciousness in Malta, and a class structure that cannot be clearly defined in terms of ownership of the means of production.

Furthermore, a high variance was noted in the upper middle class group specifically, as evidenced by the relatively wide IQR and significant Levene’s statistic ( $p < .001$ ). Neo-Marxian thought often re-frames and updates traditional proletarian-bourgeoisie conflict theory as employee-employer antagonism. The disparate views towards vocational further and higher education were, therefore, specific to what can be termed the ‘upper middle’, ‘bourgeois’, or ‘employer’ class. If employers exhibit negative attitudes towards VET on the basis of assumed personal status and prestige, their views must simultaneously account for the reality that their very existence as a class is contingent on the availability of cooperative employees. If state-sponsored VET institutions help reproduce a subservient employee class across generations, then employers must juxtapose both sympathetic and stigmatising views of VET, a conflict that helps explain the disparate views observed. For sake of analogy, a parent may exhibit, for instance, positive attitudes toward state schools and the state-sponsored public education system these more broadly represent. Yet, said parent might simultaneously reject the possibility of admitting their *own* child in such schools. In the same way, an employer may value VET in principle, yet reject the possibility of pursuing such a pathway personally, as well as discourage their children from doing so also.

<i>Class</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean rank</i>
1. Upper	6	308.83
2. Upper middle	147	320.08
3. Middle	325	283.50
4. Working	88	244.27
5. Lower	7	273.14

*Table 6: Mean ranks of attitudes towards VET by social class.*

#### *Attitudes to education and income*

The evidence for  $H_2$  supports the existence of a relationship between attitudes to VET and own income ( $F = 4.65, p < .001$ ). A visual survey of the box plots in Figure 7 shows declining positive perception of VET from left to right (from low to high personal income), with the exception of the first category, which included participants who reported not working. These results can be interpreted in conjunction with those from  $H_2$ , on the relationship of attitudes with household as opposed to personal income. We can assume that participants who reported not working, live in households with others who do, and in actual fact likely represent higher income brackets.

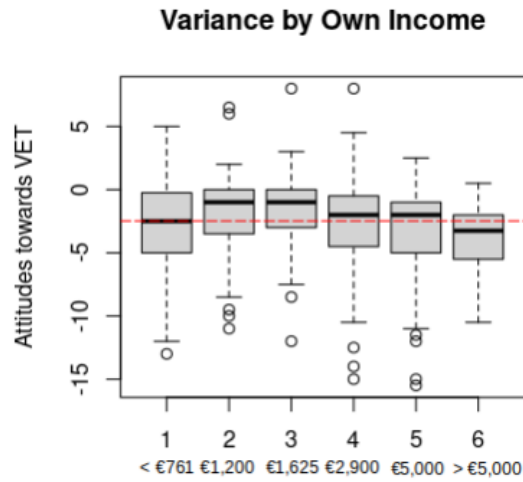


Figure 7: Visual analysis of variance by own income.

Category	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	95% CI
1. Less than €761	68	-3.13	3.62	-4.01, -2.26
2. Up to €1,200	73	-1.84	3.20	-2.59, -1.10
3. Up to €1,625	118	-1.52	2.71	-2.02, -1.03
4. Up to €2,900	220	-2.63	3.26	-3.07, -2.20
5. Up to €5,000	74	-3.22	3.74	-4.08, -2.35
6. More than €5,000	20	-3.75	2.71	-5.02, -2.48

Table 7: Descriptive statistics for attitudes across personal income categories.

An inspection of the box plots, non-overlapping CI estimates, and Tukey post-hoc multiple comparisons for categories 2 through 6 pertaining to personal income, showed that the most contrasting groups were 3 and 4 ( $p = .03$ ), as well as 3 and 5 ( $p < .01$ ). The most significant differences in attitudes towards VET, therefore, occurred among those groups straddling the critical value of €1,625 gross income per month. According to the NSO (2021; 2022), the “average” Maltese gross monthly salary is likely to be anywhere between €1,500 and €1,800. The critical value, therefore, appears to suggest receiving a monthly income either immediately above or below the average, has the most significant impact on attitudes towards VET. The discussion, however, is further complicated by the way salary data are reported. We assume that by “average” the NSO reports refer to the mean, rather than the median, which means the salary reflective of “normal” Maltese residents (arguably more aptly represented by the median), is likely to be actually lower than the figures reported.

The one-way ANOVA for household income ( $F = 3.82, p < .01$ ) provided further support for the existence of a downward trend in attitudes towards VET as income increased. According to the non-overlapping CI estimates, and Tukey post-hoc multiple comparisons, the most contrasting groups were 2 and 5 ( $p < .01$ ), locating the key cut-off point here as under €1,800, and over €2,400. In terms of standard of living, this hypothesis ( $H_3$ ) provides a more complete picture of the general trend when combined with  $H_2$ , given that all participants (including those who do not personally report working), ultimately benefit from a certain income and associated lifestyle/standard of living, that exerts some influence on their attitudes towards VET.

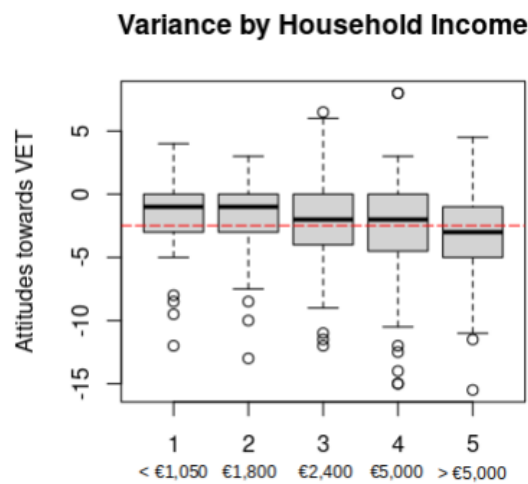


Figure 8: Visual analysis of variance by household income.

Category	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	95% CI
1. Less than €1,050	47	-1.94	2.91	-2.79, -1.08
2. Up to €1,800	77	-1.60	2.76	-2.22, -0.97
3. Up to €2,400	108	-2.23	3.31	-2.86, -1.60
4. Up to €5,000	246	-2.61	3.40	-3.04, -2.19
6. More than €5,000	95	-3.38	3.37	-4.07, -2.21

Table 8: Descriptive statistics for attitudes across household income categories.

#### Attitudes to education, own education level and occupation

A statistically significant relationship similarly emerged between attitudes to VET and own education level ( $F = 7.54, p < .01$ ), allowing a rejection of the null for  $H_4$ . The higher the level of education, the lower perceptions tended to be of VET, according to the data. While little difference was noted between those completing compulsory and further education, a visual inspection of the non-overlapping CI estimates and Tukey post-hoc test results showed that higher

education differed significantly from both compulsory ( $p = .01$ ), and further education levels ( $p < .01$ ). Future research might develop this hypothesis further, to explore extraneous effects relating to *where* participants with a Bachelor's degree or higher, actually completed their qualifications. Presently, we can expect that the highest levels of degrees currently held by local graduates were predominantly attained either from UM or foreign institutions. Further research might investigate the effects of own education level on attitudes toward VET, while taking into account where (and when) participants undertook their own undergraduate and postgraduate studies. The provision of new Master's and doctoral programmes at the VET institutions are likely to influence this trend in the future.

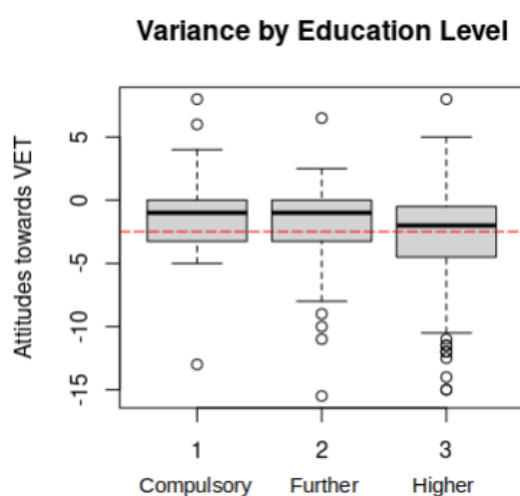


Figure 9: Visual analysis of variance by education level.

Category	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	95% CI
1. Compulsory	39	-1.28	3.38	-2.38, -0.19
2. Further	136	-1.82	2.92	-2.32, -1.33
3. Higher	398	-2.82	3.35	-3.15, -2.49

Table 9: Descriptive statistics for attitudes across education levels

In the case of occupation type, the evidence was not sufficient ( $F = 1.73, p = .13$ ), to reject the null for  $H_5$ . In other words, the evidence did not support the idea that occupation and attitudes towards VET are in any way related. Visual inspection of the box plots in Figure 10 shows the most contrasting values between professional and more manual forms of work (technicians, machine operators and trades). Given the reported  $F$  statistic and overlapping CIs, however, this difference was not statistically significant. When stratified according to type of work, therefore, attitudes towards vocational further and higher education appear to be homogeneous. This is unsurprising when taking into account the evolving nature of post-industrial society, and the shift from

agricultural and later manufacturing-based economic models, to contemporary service and knowledge-based alternatives in core and semi-peripheral countries.

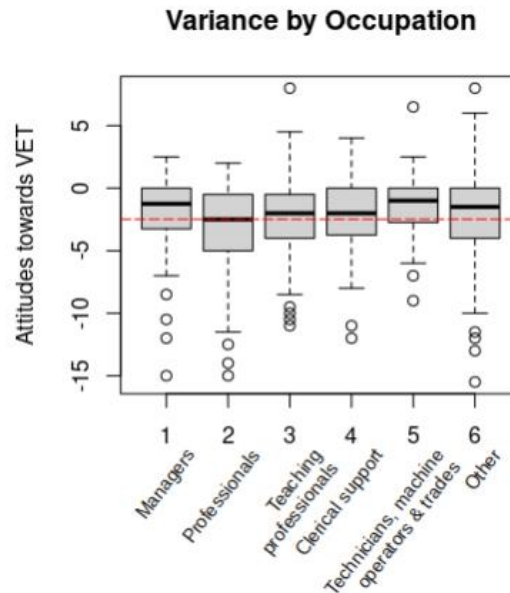


Figure 10: Visual analysis of variance by occupation.

Category	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	95% CI
1. Managers	64	-2.13	3.33	-2.96, -1.30
2. Professionals	106	-3.20	3.52	-3.88, -2.52
3. Teaching professionals	192	-2.46	2.86	-2.87, -2.06
4. Clerical support	32	-2.22	3.37	-3.44, -1.00
5. Technicians, machine operators & trades	27	-1.48	3.30	-2.79, -0.18
6. Other	152	-2.37	3.56	-2.94, -1.80

Table 10: Descriptive statistics for attitudes across occupation groups.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Further research using a path analysis or structural equation modeling approach may help facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of social class structure in Malta. This would in turn provide a firmer theoretical and empirical basis for studies looking to explore the relationship between social class and any other complex phenomena like further and higher education provision. Given the variations observed in the present study, specifically within the upper middle class group, future studies might also employ more nuanced measurements of attitudes toward VET, with a view to differentiating between perceived benefits of VET in relation to self and others. In the present

study, a bespoke seven-item scale was used to measure attitudes towards the main further and higher education institutions in Malta more generally, in conjunction with a theoretical model of social class and SES. We did not take into account, for instance, uniquely Maltese conjectures about additional constituents of self-identified class and SES like political connections, or particularities surrounding personal social and business networks. The factors we investigated ultimately explained a relatively small proportion of the total variation in attitudes, rendering additional novel factors amenable to discovery by local educational researchers in future studies. As research continues to refine knowledge about local social phenomena, more powerful claims about any resulting relationships can be made. Furthermore, as higher education qualifications from vocational institutions proliferate in Maltese society in the future, researchers might track attitudes and prestige-attribution as they evolve over time.

The present study nevertheless shows, despite a relatively small main effect size, that an observable and statistically significant association can be inferred between attitudes to vocational education and self-identified social class. The same holds for financial income and education level as markers of SES. Across all these factors, increases in status were associated with decreasing approval of new vocational further and higher education institutions as opposed to the traditional academic university as a baseline. Type of occupation exerted no observable effect. The most antagonistic groups in terms of attitudes toward VET were the working and upper middle class, or in neo-Marxian terms, employees and employers. In terms of income, a gross monthly salary of €1,625 emerged as a pivotal value, with those earning more than this amount likely to exhibit slightly more positive perceptions of UM.

For UM, the results provide some cause for reflection, about what is being done, exactly, within Malta's most prestigious and traditionally academic higher education environment, to challenge patterns of hierarchical thinking and entitlement among those who will most likely to go on to participate in the important conversations in Maltese society influencing distributions of wealth, social rewards and privileges. For VET providers, the results arguably raise compelling questions about the ever-present parity of esteem issue. James Relly (2021) argued that in countries with successful vocational education sectors, the vocational and academic routes are complementary but not analogous, and that the notion of parity of esteem tends to be a uniquely Anglo-centric variety of political rhetoric. Parity of esteem largely ignores what she described as the "elephant in the room", or rather, the problematic notion of *upward social mobility* resulting from educational achievements. While one may strive for upward social mobility through the pursuit of vocational qualifications, motivated by the idea that all qualifications are equal, they are instead likely to encounter a rigid and inflexible social class structure that continues to be reproduced across generations. Without real material benefits conveyed by



society upon those graduating from VET institutions, the consolation prize of apparent parity of esteem is both anti-climactic, and vacuous.

Associating varying levels of prestige to higher qualifications from different institutions means that despite apparent parity according to formal qualifications frameworks, a type of special pleading is introduced with the effect of continuously adjusting the socially relevant value of certain qualifications. To maintain the integrity of entrenched class lines, the goalposts must be continuously moved in order to preserve restricted access to the elusive rewards of higher social status. This becomes all the more important for maintenance of the status quo as increasing numbers of graduates attain, and subsequently attempt to cash in, what they have been led to believe are valid status symbols with an exchange value for increasing their social capital. In this view, if at the societal level education actually reinforces and reproduces class divisions instead of disrupting them, then qualifications increasingly come to resemble symbols of what Baldacchino (1993) called “status exhibitionism”. In other words, a critical interpretation of prestige as it applies to further and higher education, increasingly renders qualifications as referents, or accolades that serve to confirm existing social class, rather than change it. What seems to matter, ultimately, is that people identifying with a certain social class hold the right *kind* of qualifications as an authentication of their existing status. The promotion of VET, therefore, or indeed any other initiatives pertaining to the development of Malta’s rapidly-evolving tracked further and higher education system, should arguably serve not only the aim of dismantling outdated assumptions about prestige and privilege, but also pursue broader policy reforms facilitating the real material conditions needed to act as genuine incentives for students considering VET pathways, regardless of their prior socioeconomic circumstances.

## References

- Baldacchino, G. (1993). Social class in Malta : insights into a homegrown relationship with special reference to education. *Education*, 5(1), pp23-32.
- Cedefop (2011). *The benefits of vocational education and training*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Clarke, L. & Winch, C. (2007). Introduction. In: Clarke, L. & Winch, C. (Eds.) *Vocational Education: International Approaches, Developments and Systems* (pp1-18). London: Routledge.
- Claus, J. (1990). Opportunity or Inequality in Vocational Education? A Qualitative Investigation. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 20(1), pp7-39.
- Easterbrook, M. J., Kuppens, T., & Manstead, A. S. (2020). Socioeconomic status and the structure of the self-concept. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 59(1), pp66-86.
- James Relly, S. (2021). The political rhetoric of parity of esteem. *Oxford Review of Education*, 47(4), pp513-528.

- Manstead, A. S. R. (2018). *The psychology of social class: How socioeconomic status impacts thought, feelings, and behaviour*. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 57(2), pp267–291. doi:10.1111/bjso.12251
- Mayo, P. (2021). The politics of education. *Xjenza Online*, 9(Special Iss.), pp114-121.
- Muscat-Ingloott, M. (2021). Curricular brood parasitism in Malta: An empirical study of vocational education and the reproduction of social inequality. *The SOJO Journal: Educational Foundations and Social Justice Education*, 7(2) pp53-66.
- NSO (2023). Maltese National Statistics Office - Census of Population and Housing 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://nso.gov.mt/en/nso/Media/Salient-Points-of-Publications/Documents/2023/Census%20of%20Population%202021%20volume1-final.pdf>
- NSO (2021). NSO News Release 24 June 2021 [online]. Available at: [https://nso.gov.mt/en/News\\_Releases/Documents/2021/06/News2021\\_112.pdf](https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/Documents/2021/06/News2021_112.pdf)
- NSO (2022). NSO News Release 14 June 2022 [online]. Available at: [https://nso.gov.mt/en/News\\_Releases/Documents/2022/06/News2022\\_104.pdf](https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/Documents/2022/06/News2022_104.pdf)
- Parkes, D. (1993). Parity of esteem for vocational education? *European Journal of Education*, pp131-134.
- Rubin, M., Denson, N., Kilpatrick, S., Matthews, K. E., Stehlik, T., & Zyngier, D. (2014). "I am working-class" subjective self-definition as a missing measure of social class and socioeconomic status in higher education research. *Educational Researcher*, 43(4), pp196-200.
- Said, A. (2020). *Vocational Teacher Educators' Identity: a symbiosis of roles and contexts*. Lancaster University (United Kingdom).
- Sultana, R. G. (1991). Sociological perspectives on class in Malta. *Economic and Social Studies (New Series)*, 5, pp1-24.
- Sultana, R. G. (1997). Education as struggle. In R. G. Sultana (Eds.), *Inside/outside schools : towards a critical sociology of education in Malta* (pp55-86). San Gwann: Publishers Enterprises Group (PEG) Ltd.
- Wheelahan, L. (2015). Not just skills: What a Focus on Knowledge Means for Vocational Education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 47(6), pp750–762.