

# Ensuring Accessible and Inclusive Education for All



**Hon. Dr. Clifton Grima,**  
Minister for Education, Sports,  
Youth, Research, and Innovation,  
Government of Malta

**I welcome the occasion to look back at the unprecedented challenges brought about by the two-year COVID-19 pandemic, but also delve into lessons learnt and the way forward. I emphasise 'lessons learnt', as I firmly believe that the challenges we faced led us to adapt and turn those challenges into opportunities.**

Malta observes that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected and put unprecedented pressure on education and training systems worldwide. Education is fundamental to well-being and is a foundation of collective resilience. The need to rethink and reimagine its role was already acute before the pandemic, in light of technological changes and the need to reskill for the transition to a more sustainable economy.

We believe that although the switch to digital teaching and learning played a major role in enabling the continuation of the learning process during the pandemic, digital education cannot fully substitute quality face-to-face teaching and learning.

In view of the significant disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, Malta developed a number of measures aimed at supporting all students and mitigate the impact of these disruptions. These permanent

measures have enhanced the educational journey for all students and allowed for the development of best practices, which will also be retained post-Covid. The COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to strengthen Malta's digital preparedness and digital tools to improve the quality and inclusiveness of education systems.

We believe that digital education and training also needs to prioritise the needs and circumstances of vulnerable learners. Malta is ensuring that free internet access and electronic devices: laptops and tablets are provided. This became ever more important following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach has recently been extended to encourage post-secondary education, where eligible students will benefit from free internet for one year if opting to immediately continue their studies after finishing secondary education. The 2022-23 Scholastic Year will also see the distribution of free laptops to all Year 7 Students.

Malta continued to operate virtual primary, middle and secondary schools for medically vulnerable students, as well as providing 12,643 free online recorded lessons through Teleskola that are accessible on-demand.

This measure was supported by an educational Catch-Up programme organised over summer 2021, targeting medically vulnerable students who missed out on lessons. This continued



in Scholastic Year 2021/2022. Such measures serve as a good exploratory platform to tap into the possibilities of exploring mixed online and offline blended learning methods.

Post-compulsory and tertiary institutions also re-opened their doors through the adoption of multiple approaches to lecture delivery, in-person, online and hybrid options.

Malta's supportive measures brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic are being monitored and evaluated within the observation of the government's programme.

Challenges have been significant, and they have also brought to the fore the need to continue to modernise education systems and build sustainable strategies for inclusive and open-ended pathways which cater for all abilities and thus tap into the potential of all students.

Malta's education system has

undergone a series of adaptations in the wake of the pandemic in a bid to maintain access to quality and equitable education. In this regard, adaptation measures have devoted particular attention to maximising the use of innovative teaching and learning, including more emphasis on the use of digital tools.

Throughout the pandemic, we maximised the available virtual resources whilst continuing to provide access to high-quality education, a top priority. I consider that resetting education and training for the digital age is key for maintaining the high standards of life and economic growth.

The digital transition is creating promising opportunities whilst bringing forward newly implied challenges. In this regard, we consider that further discussions and assessments are needed to properly assess the impact whilst

preparing a cohesive mitigation plan so that no one is left behind, which also ensures a smooth transition towards digitalisation.

It is imperative for educational institutions, including Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions and universities, to focus further on putting digital and innovation skills at the core of learning experiences. This can be achieved by seeking ways in which such experiences are incorporated into the theoretical and practical components of curricula. Malta has targeted the enhancement of digital literacy amongst young learners through the One Tablet Per Child initiative.

Thus, we are supporting social inclusion, particularly in relation to access to digital platforms and tools, such as through this One Tablet Per Child scheme, established to ensure that all children are given a fair and equal

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opportunity to be closer to technology.

Education and training play a key role in fostering a skilled and knowledgeable society which is able to address challenges faced and identify opportunities.

It is essential that we rethink how education and training can enhance equal access, create opportunities for all and guarantee better social well-being. In doing so, it is important to ensure that we move away from a 'one size fits all' system to more inclusive and equal programmes which maximise the abilities and skills of each individual.

I believe that in reviewing education priorities, the Commonwealth needs to renew its approach to bringing education closer to industry needs and ensure that our learning systems are able to cater for any forthcoming changes.

Rethinking our education priorities involves placing a renewed focus on achieving high-quality education for all, through inclusion and diversity

too. This involves placing particular emphasis on ensuring access to continued education for disadvantaged students to guarantee education systems that work for all.

Furthermore, adaptations need to focus on blending formal, informal, and non-formal education in order to ensure the acquisition of relevant skills, aptitudes and lifelong values required for active and responsible citizenry.

As all Commonwealth nations are recovering from the pandemic, it is opportune enough to think about how through our shared principles, we can rethink our outlook towards inclusive and accessible education mechanisms which can prepare learners for upcoming challenges and transitions.

Skills mismatches remain a challenging reality across the global economy, which has increased with the onset of both digital and green transitions.

In this regard, Malta supports continued investments in digital

infrastructure, as well as learning opportunities through the development of policies geared towards supporting skills development within and beyond compulsory school age.

Within compulsory education settings, personalisation and mobilisation of learning are key in order to keep up with the modern advances of today's society.

I believe in the collective need for the Commonwealth to ensure investment in the creation of adaptable, accessible, and high-quality education opportunities. This will serve to enable an actively engaged society that leaves nobody behind.

Lessons learnt will be our strength to shape a better future through collective effort and collaboration. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is that we can no longer operate in a vacuum, and cooperative initiatives are not only beneficial but necessary to ensure open channels of communication among us. ■

