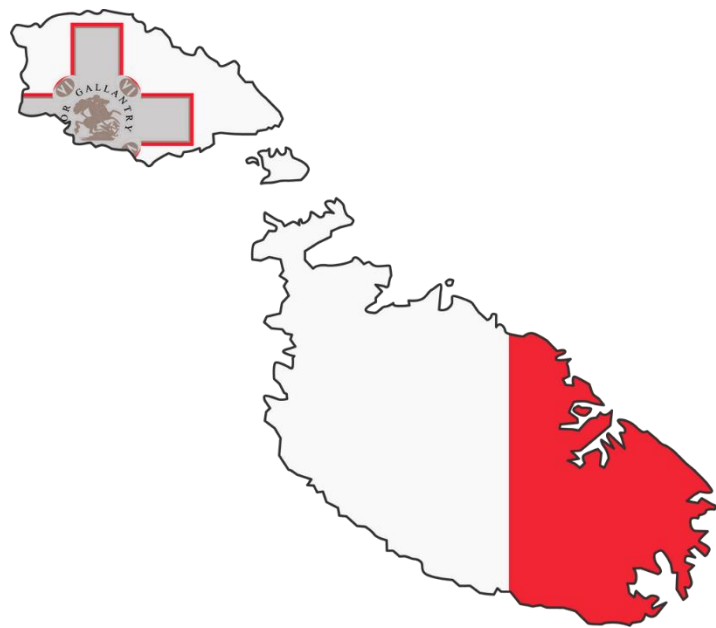


Status Quo Report on Student Engagement with Society

Qual-Ai-ty Engagement Country Report: Malta



Fostering Student Engagement through AI-driven Qualitative Quality Assurance Practices
A Project Developed by:



UNIVERSITY
OF TWENTE.



MCAST



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Project: Fostering Student Engagement through AI-driven Qualitative Quality Assurance Practices

Consortium Partners

Riga Technical University

The University of Twente

Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST)

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	3
Background and Current State.....	3
Context	4
IMPLEMENTATION	8
Activities.....	8
Teaching and Learning	8
Research.....	8
Student-Driven Initiatives	9
Inputs	9
Outputs	10
Impacts	11
INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS	13
Supportive mechanism	13
Drivers/ Motivations	14
Stakeholders	14
Barriers	15
FURTHER INSIGHTS	16
Linkage to QA	16
Incentives.....	16
Opportunities.....	17
REFERENCES.....	18

INTRODUCTION

Background and Current State

The Maltese government provides maintenance grants and stipends to students in Higher Education with the aim of encouraging continued education and ensuring a highly trained workforce. This incentive attracts students towards education institutions, while the institutions themselves then come up with initiatives to maintain student engagement.

Government funded institutions such as MCAST cater to a variety of students from different socio-economic backgrounds. MCAST is a location where students may find the guidance and assistance required to provide better opportunities of employment, as well as social support systems that encourage students to flourish beyond academia and work. Through the availability of career guidance and personal counselling at the MCAST Wellbeing Hub, students are given the space to work on their own personal and professional development under the guidance of trained professionals.

MCAST programmes include credited units that encourage students to participate in community service through the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) department. These units expose students to the varying needs in the Maltese community as they encounter NGOs and assist within the various technical and administrative needs for reaching their goals. These opportunities provide students the ability to utilizing their skills, competences and knowledge within contextual settings, enabling the student engagement to augment the ability for students to involve themselves within society whilst contributing their expertise and learning.

Through the Erasmus+ programme, the MCAST International Office invites students to further their engagement with society to involve the rest of Europe. The Erasmus+ programme's aims include the sharing of knowledge and good practices amongst the programme countries, and to develop a better understanding of the European context and encourage the development of a common European identity. MCAST students have recently established our own branch of the Erasmus+ Student Network (ESN), and effort led primarily by students with the assistance of the MCAST International Office, with the aim of assisting and engaging both incoming and outgoing students.

Similar initiatives are also present in other educational institutions such as the University of Malta, the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS), the G. F. Abela Junior College as well as Church-owned and private educational institutions across the island.

Context

Individual

- Age - The incentive of stipends results in HEIs with younger students straight out of compulsory education. Maltese students often engage in part-time employment during their studies from ages as young as 16. This results in students needing to split their time between education and school, often limiting community services to credited extra-curricular activities. Older students are often employed full-time and attending part-time upskilling or reskilling courses. In such cases students are less likely to participate in extra-curricular activities.
- Gender - MCAST attracts a higher number of male students who seem more inclined towards VET, whereas the University of Malta attracts a higher number of female students who seem more inclined towards traditional formal education. While the student bodies differ in both cases, there is equal opportunity for student engagement to both genders. Malta also recognises non-binary students who are encouraged to participate in curricular and extra-curricular activities as much as the binary genders. Both institutions have a recognised student organisation dedicated towards LGBTIQ+ rights and representation that aim to promote the inclusion of non-binary students. Maltese law also requires all public institutions to include the option of 'Other' in forms and surveys. This further promotes the inclusion of non-binary students in community-oriented activities.
- Areas of knowledge - students following subjects oriented towards community services (ex. Childcare, animal husbandry etc) are encouraged by their course to be involved in the local community through internships. While internships are present in other courses, these students are more likely to work in private businesses than NGOs and therefore become more in tune with the industry needs than the community needs.
- Education level of university students. As the leading vocational institution in Malta, MCAST provides educational entry-points throughout the spectrum of academia. To this extent, the organization leads students to qualifications ranging across EQF level 1 – 7. This provides a breadth of educational experience and exposure which enables students to engage through diverse levels of study.
- Relevant expertise of university teachers - Being a vocational college, MCAST's mission and strategy revolves around industry-academia engagement, and thus specific focus is provided to recruit and support lecturers with industrial expertise and experience. This leads towards

academic and research programmes that are attune to the societal needs and exposure, with constant interaction and development of academic practices in line with industry demands.

- Interest of community member in higher education - Through dedicate offices within work-based learning, apprentices, corporate social responsibility and communications, MCAST establishes various channels of communications to provide insight to the community on the various initiatives undertaken within the institution, whilst enabling the attainment of feedback and interest to be elicited. To this extent, numerous boards at different levels of the organization include direct involvement of community members to ensure that the MCAST's direction is aligned to the sensitivity of the society and is able to integrate its focus.

Organizational

- Types and focus of HEI - Malta provides students with various options of engagement and focus for Higher Education, with traditional Universities providing academic opportunities through both public (University of Malta) and private entities (ex. Middlesex University, University College London, Hertfordshire University, Wolverhampton University). Furthermore, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) provides a vocational stream of HEI opportunities across different sectors, whilst the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS) focuses primarily on the Hospitality Industry.
- Size of HEI - due to the size of Malta, Maltese HEIs are small, however they attract most of the potential student population due to the limited amount of HEIs present on the island. Some statistics outline that 11,500 students are studying at University Level, 11,700 reading programmes at MCAST and around 1,200 students studying at ITS.
- Activities of student union or student body - Each HEI entity harbours a set of student bodies/unions that represent the student population and are usually elected through democratic processes on a yearly basis. These include; Kunsill Studenti MCAST (KSM), Kunsill Studenti Univeritarji (KSU),
- Size and activities of community organizations

National

- Political - with the voting age in Malta set at 16 years, Maltese students are encouraged to be aware of and participate in political activities from a young age. The Junior College and the University of Malta are the two institutions where this becomes most clear. Both institution's student council consist of two parties that directly represent Malta's two-party government structure. The student parties are endorsed by the respective political party, and the students that form these parties are often also

involved in the respective political party's youth wing. Moreover, the two political parties in Malta offer the possibility of participating in the youth version of local councils, as well as several initiatives to attract young aspiring politicians in their youth wings.

- Structural
- Economic - Through the stipend system, Maltese students are granted a means of sustaining their studies and purchasing materials required for the successful completion of their courses. A supplementary stipend is available to students from low-income families or single-parent households that aim to provide additional support to students who require it. Nonetheless, a large portion of the student body opts to engage in part-time or casual employment while studying. Following a full-time course in Malta prohibits you from having full-time employment, though it is known that in some cases students working 'off the books' do in fact surpass the maximum number of hours granted to part-time and casual employment. Between studies and employment, some students do not have the time to participate in extra-curricular activities, opting rather to focus on securing their income. Despite the stipend system, children from the lower economical classes of Maltese society often opt to work rather than study once they complete mandatory education. Both government and educational institutions have created initiatives to attract such students to education later in life. MCAST offers around 300 part-time courses, most of which aim at upskilling or re-skilling employed individuals who aim to upgrade their grade of employment or change their career entirely.
- Social – Maltese culture and society, influenced by the Christian faith and its values, promotes and supports the engagement of youth in the community. Student engagement and contribution of voluntary services is at times enforced by educational institutions and is commonly known to have a positive outlook from prospective employers. This is reflected also in the frequent promotion of such activities and praise of participants on Maltese Media outlets.
- Technological – Most students that are in Maltese colleges have good access to technology. Government also provides a maintenance grant which can be used to purchase any technical equipment. Internet connection is also widely available throughout all the country, and also is provided free for one year to all post-secondary students.
- Geographical –Malta is a very small country and thus student can engage better with different stakeholders. However, over the years government and educational institutions have had to make efforts in facilitating student engagement from Gozo residents. Gozitan youths wishing to continue

higher education often had to reside in Malta during the week and return to Gozo during the weekend, which may have hindered their ability to engage in some activities occurring during the weekends or holiday periods. The cost of renting in Malta and living away from family also proved detrimental to some Gozitan students' ability or interest in furthering their education. With educational institutions opening campuses and offering some of their courses on demand in Gozo, Gozitan students can attend HEIs more easily.

- Legal – In line with the national act on Education, (https://education.gov.mt/en/Documents/Malta_education_act_2010.pdf), the engagement of students is bound within governmental institutions and universities (such as University of Malta and MCAST) as well as defined as a practice for consultation through the quality assurance of all educational endeavours and qualifications.
- Environmental

IMPLEMENTATION

Activities

Teaching and Learning

- 1) MCAST focuses on its **Corporate Social Responsibility** by giving the students the opportunity to work within NGOs, local councils and sports associations, and providing their expertise to such communities. This is also done through an accredited Level 6 unit which carries 6 ECTS credits, which is mandatory for students to achieve their degree.
- 2) At Level 6 Students have a **Work based unit** carrying 12 ECTS whereby students go to companies to work as **Apprentices**. For example, at the ICT Institute approximately 86 students from the Multimedia Software Development, Software Development, and Computer Systems and Network go for 2 days a week in several companies on their line of study, as apprentices. This allows students to get the ability to apply their learning to real life scenarios.
- 3) Both at Level 4 and Level 6 students follow an **Entrepreneurship** unit whereby students, especially at Level 6 are followed by an Industry mentor and work on an idea which can then be commercialized. This is done by having students from different institutes working together on a specific product.
- 4) All MCAST programmes are created through the help and feedback of **Industry, Lecturers** and **Students**. In fact, every time a new Programme is suggested, all stakeholders come on board to discuss what topics, and units to include in such programmes. Moreover, every three years each Programmes goes through a Review to ensure that topics are still industry relevant.

Research

- 1) Research projects focused on the societal needs of the university's external communities. *Students from all institutes at MCAST are heavily encouraged towards engaging in research projects in line with societal needs. This is commonly witnessed within final year projects, where undergraduate and postgraduate students contextualize their research studies in line with industrial and societal sectors and contribute their work towards enhancing the respective operations of these entities. These engagement opportunities provide various benefits to the students and stakeholders, which are able to contextualize their study, gain insight into employment opportunities as well as obtain resources and collaborative support to undertake their projects.*
Erasmus+ KA2 Greening project involving students in a foster a tree initiative.
- 2) Collaborative/participatory research in cooperation with the university's external communities.

Students are regularly encouraged to participate and contribute within diverse projects organised by MCAST as part of the EIT Climate KIC Hub and EIT Urban Mobility KIC, whereby the national Ministry for the Environment, Sustainable Development and Climate Change champions challenges which enable students to contribute their ideas towards imparting local change initiatives. Examples of such opportunities can be accessed at: <https://climathon.climate-kic.org/valletta>

Student-Driven Initiatives

- 1) Students deliver community-engagement activities independently through student organizations or initiatives.
<https://maltacvs.org/voluntary-category/students-associations/>
ESN MCAST organise regular activities for local and incoming Erasmus+ students. These include recreational activities such as sports and gatherings, but also community-oriented activities such as clean-ups, voluntary work at animal shelters etc.
- 2) Kunsill Studenti MCAST (KSM) - The KSM (Kunsill Studenti MCAST) is an independent, unaffiliated body at the heart of the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology campuses in Malta and Gozo, whose sole purpose is to represent and safeguard the rights of each and every MCAST student. The KSM executive is composed of eight members who are directly elected by the students themselves in the yearly council election. For the first time this year, after the KSM election, another election was held whereby all Institute representatives elected their Student Liaison Officer to secure a voice in the KSM executive. The KSM executive members come from different satellite Institutes of the College, and promote the College's interests while also working tirelessly to involve the students themselves in the epicentre of College affairs, events, campaigns and initiatives.
- 3) The Youth Voluntary Work Scheme aims to support young people taking an active part in Voluntary Organisations. The first goal of the scheme is to help young people improve their skills and employment prospects by giving them an opportunity to take up volunteering as part of their non-formal and informal learning process. It will also enable them to discover the value of voluntary service and help to foster a sense of community and active citizenship. [<https://vofunding.org.mt/funds/11>]

Inputs

In terms of human resources there are two types of resources dedicated to driving student engagement, direct and indirect human resources. In terms of direct human resources, MCAST has a dedicated team working on promoting CSR activities with students and supporting in the logistics of the CPD activities. MCAST also has an office working on Work-based learning. Indirectly, the institutes are structured in a way to ensure personal contact with the students and to ensure that student driven initiatives are supported and promoted.

In Malta all government post-secondary education is free for all EU citizens. Moreover, to encourage students to continue with their post-secondary education, each student receives a monthly stipend throughout the year, together with an annual maintenance grant at the beginning of each academic year.

The anticipated key resources required:

- Human Resources
- European Funds
- Private company sponsorships
- Database of Voluntary NGOs.
- Promotional of good showcases
- Coordinating national organizations / Steering Committees
- Hubs dedicated for student engagement.

Outputs

Several NGOs, elderly homes, animal sanctuaries etc. benefit from initiatives by educational institutions to promote voluntary community services. MCAST does so through the CSR department, whereas the University of Malta does so through the Degree Plus initiative. These initiatives not only create the availability of voluntary workers, but they also coordinate where the human resources are directed towards to ensure all sectors are adequately served through the initiatives.

MCAST's inclusion of an apprenticeship or placement component also serves to provide private local businesses with a steady influx of workers who are remunerated by the government. In the past the apprenticeships were paid partly from the government funds and partly from the industry funds, however a new scheme was devised to support industries in hosting interns at no extra cost during the pandemic. The Maltese hospital and elderly homes around the island benefit from nursing student placements, whereas childcare centres and kindergartens benefit from Early Childhood Learning students completing mandatory placements.

The University of Malta also requires Psychology graduates to complete hours of voluntary services in the field of social wellbeing to be considered for a Master's degree in Psychology. Social Work students at the University of Malta must also complete a placement in the local government agencies or NGO's assisting children, recovering drug addicts, abuse victims etc.

St. Aloysius Sixth Form obliges students to complete 100 hours of community services at an institution of their choice throughout their two years of education. These are often done in children's homes, elderly care facilities, animal shelters, food banks or shelters for abuse victims.

All Maltese educational institutions possess a chaplaincy or a religious group that provides pastoral support as well as manages the Christian student organization in each respective institution. The chaplaincy also strives towards involving students in community-oriented activities and voluntary services.

On a political level of student engagement, we see the involvement of students in the youth wing of the political parties, as well as in activist non-governmental organisations that aim to promote transparency and accountability from parliamentary parties.

Impacts

Individual – Students gain the necessary skills to compete on the employment market through a variety of initiatives such as Erasmus+ mobility, Apprenticeships and the CSR/Degree Plus activities. Apart from professional development, students who participate in such initiatives also report personal development through an increase in their social and professional network, the development of soft skills, as well as gaining a more profound understanding of responsibility and independence.

Organisational - When students are engaged in the quality assurance of programmes and initiatives, the respective educational institutions can better adapt and accommodate students' needs. Educational institutions also benefit from student engagement with society as it promotes the institution to the local community, and in the case of Public Institutions such as MCAST, such positive perceptions from the local community contribute towards higher chances of funding opportunities.

National - On a national level, student engagement contributes towards the identification of issues and improvement of processes within the local community. Malta benefits from student engagement on various levels in the sectors of public health, environment, industry and entrepreneurship as well as immigration and integration. While lacking in natural resources, Malta has long boasted its availability of human resources, contributing to the Maltese economy relying heavily on the financial services industry, manufacturing industry, tourism industry and the real estate/construction industry. All of these industries have greatly benefitted from student engagement in apprenticeships and internships throughout the years. While the government, and in some cases the industry, fund students' labour, it provides human resources at a lower expenditure while simultaneously skilling and preparing young workers for future industry needs.

Limitations on measuring impact of student engagement on these different levels consist of:

- lack of specified continuous studies carried out over several years.
- The inability to quantify impact across a myriad of dimensions which are effective through student engagement.

- The quantized nature of data collection mechanisms quickly provides periodical insight mostly sensitive to time-based activities.
- a need for more collaboration between the different educational institutions and government entities to collect data and analyse the impact of student engagement across organisations and on a national level.
- While some initiatives for student engagement involve a means of measuring impact on an individual level, this data is not made readily available to the public or other institutions.



INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS

Supportive mechanism

In the case of MCAST one of the policies that was fundamental in driving student engagement was the setting of an MCAST Corporate Social Responsibility Policy. An excerpt from MCAST website on what this policy offers is included underneath for reference.

The life of a student is not only about getting grades and passing examinations. It is more than that. Students need to be socially responsible and learn how to be involved, committed and serve society. In February 2019, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology launched its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme with the aim of providing MCAST learners the opportunity to enhance their studies with life-enriching experiences that add value to their holistic knowledge base. The main objectives of the CSR programme are to equip MCAST students with the necessary skills, attitudes and values in order to engage in meaningful social relations and actively contribute to enhanced social well-being. In this context, MCAST CSR contributes towards the fostering of a responsible and active citizenship.

As of academic year 2019/2020, the implementation of the CSR initiative has primarily encouraged personal development among students at MCAST while having a positive impact in the local community. The initiative has enhanced relationships with the CSR partners, in supporting public value outcomes. All students at MCAST have the opportunity to carry out community work at either non-governmental organisations, sports associations, care homes for the elderly and local councils, as part of their training programme.

Learners participating in the MCAST CSR can enhance their educational experience during their study period at MCAST through a diverse range of opportunities provided by MCAST in collaboration with interested stakeholders. Up to date, MCAST students have had the opportunity to carry out community work through various areas such as the environment, culture, education, sports, social care, among others. The activities have been various and include administration work, coaching in different sports discipline, helping out in homes for children and the elderly, maintaining websites and social media platforms and helping NGOs in their daily work by caring for abandoned animals, among others. Furthermore, students have also come up with ideas of their own to help their fellow students or the community. There are plans to embark on various CSR projects both within MCAST and also within the local community. The MCAST CSR and Events Department is working closely with various organisations on different projects to help its student and staff population

understand better the importance of putting something back into society, investing in worthwhile causes, institutions and organisations, providing support to community initiatives and contributing towards environmental sustainability.

Apart from the benefits already mentioned, MCAST CSR has provided a framework for all MCAST learners to have the knowledge and skills acquired in non-formal and informal settings recognised and accredited.

MCAST CSR has gone beyond broadcasting a message of awareness. It has become a platform where the MCAST population has taken action. The initiative has helped in changing students' mind set through the activities they conduct. It has made them aware that if they want to grow in life, being a responsible citizen is a must.

Drivers/ Motivations

As is clear from all the Universities in Malta, the main driver behind student engagement is the credits associated with a task. Thus, students are encouraged to participate in different activities, and get credits in return.

There are also cases where certificates are given to students who participate in specific activities, and then this are then listed in their final transcript.

Finally, one of the motivations that helps students participate more is the fact that when they come to find a job, they could show tangible proof on what they achieved, and worked on, whilst studying at a specific University.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders to help with student engagement include:

- 1) **Students** – Student organizations, and a student council where discussions on student's learning and other activities are discussed. At University of Malta there is KSU which is the main student organization.
- 2) **Teachers** – Students and teachers, especially in these COVID times keep in touch with the use of remote tools such as Teams. However, MCAST also has Moodle in place within all Institute, where students can also download all relevant unit material. Lecturers prepare Schemes of work and upload them on Moodle so students would know the topics that will be covered.
- 3) **University Administrators** – Students also use Teams or emails to communicate with Administrators, but also face to face communication is important, especially when issues arise.

- 4) **Businesses** – Students following several MCAST courses, work as Apprentices and have a direct communication with industry. Industry, on the other hand, also participate in delivering lecturer in technologies that are being used in industry. This way students would have a clear overview of the technologies used within industry, and ensure that they work on technologies being used in industry. Another example, for example at MCAST, is that companies organize competitions for students to work on specific problems. Through such competitions, companies can see and appreciate the students' skills.
- 5) **Non-profit organizations** – As explained in previous sections, students also work within non-profit organizations through an accredited unit, where student do voluntary work. There are also occasions where non-profit organization come over to meet students to discuss some sort of project that students could help with their implementation.
- 6) **Prospectus** – Every year MCAST launches a prospectus which shows all the courses available that students can follow. This prospectus is actually designed by MCAST Creative Arts students themselves. This allows MCAST to have a prospectus which has fresh design ideas.

Barriers

We feel that the biggest barrier for student engagement is time, and financial resources. For example, most of the time, students, even though they receive a stipend, feel that such monetary compensation is not enough. Thus, for example, at MCAST we see many students who opt to work part time. When we have discussions with students, they also mention the fact that they do not have enough time, to work on anything extra, apart from work, and their studies.

Another barrier is that some students might not be aware of the possibilities that exist out there. Thus, each education institution should try to publicize specific activities, and how students could participate in such activities.

FURTHER INSIGHTS

Linkage to QA

In the MCAST context student engagement as part of dedicated CPD programmes and /or internships are guided through QA processes and overseen by the MCAST QA department. The units are accredited and students undergoing such modules would obtain ECTS. Moreover, the QA department also ensures that student feedback is collated and integrated within the design of every new programme and module that gets evaluated by the department, ensuring that a holistic reflection is obtained on the impact that the educational unit will create on the social and industry engagement of students.

From an organizational perspective to ensure Quality integration throughout the educational institutions, student representatives are embedded formally within all tactical and operational boards within the faculties, ensuring that the engagement of students is reflected within each policy and procedure issued by the QA department.

Furthermore, within the external examination and Degree Ratification boards held to analyse and ensure the quality of education provided through all the degrees awarded by the college, student engagement is considered an integral part of process. A subset of student sample is directly engaged through the external review panel to seek feedback, together with written and verbal feedback elicited from the student corpus which is reviewed by the examination panel.

Incentives

In order to stimulate student engagement, students should be given tangible rewards. In Malta students who participate in CSR activities at MCAST or Degree Plus at UoM are rewarded for their participation through extra credits on their degree. However, to ensure that this is successful close monitoring should be done to ensure that students are really contributing to society, and it does not become a rubber-stamping exercise. Tangible rewards such as credits and certificates are important as they can be included in a student's CV and increase their employment prospects, a large motivator for student engagement in volunteering activities.

Intangible rewards that the students feel they have gained from student engagement vary depending on the type of activity they are engaged in. In some cases, it may be the development of soft skills, in others it may be an increasingly more connected or broader network of peers, while other activities might give students more awareness on socio-political issues in Malta and encourage them to be more pro-active citizens in daily life. A good practice implemented in Malta as well as the Erasmus+ programme is to distribute questionnaires that require students to review their experience and reflect on the significance of their engagement with community on their own personal lives.

Opportunities

1. Student activities should also be heavily marketed, so that everyone can see the good work being done by their counterparts. Visibility is key in this sense.
2. Sharing of good experiences between students should also be encouraged, but it's only through such activities that other students will be motivated to do what their friends are doing.
3. Colleges should also ensure that student engagement is logged, and also included in the students' transcript.
4. At the start of each college year, talks should be organized, by alumni where they share their experiences with new students, so that this student engagement culture is fostered, as from when the student starts his academic journey. New students should clearly see the advantages, student engagement provides.
5. There should be a close collaboration between lecturers and students in different forms, such as online, face to face etc. Lecturers should use their own experience to help students engage with society, such as speaking to companies, friends and colleagues, to help out students engage with society.

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- Malta College of Arts Science and Technology, www.mcast.edu.mt
- University of Malta, <https://www.um.edu.mt/>
- Malta Student Union Societies, <https://www.um.edu.mt/studentlife/studentsocieties>
- University Student Union Council, <https://www.ksu.org.mt/>
- Middlesex University Student Union, <https://www.mdx.edu.mt/life-at-middlesex/our-students/students-union>
- MCAST Student Union, <https://www.mcast.edu.mt/what-is-kms/>
- Malta National Youth Council, <https://knz.org.mt/>
- Voluntary Organisations list provided by the Ministry of Education, https://education.gov.mt/en/vo_home/Pages/vo_list.aspx
- List of NGOs that have collaborated with MCAST CSR Department, <https://www.mcast.edu.mt/list-of-ngos/?listpage=1&instance=3>

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