



THE CHURCH IN MALTA

COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE
Archdiocese of Malta

31st May 2016

47/2016

MISLEADING IMPRESSIONS OF CAMBRIDGE ENGLISH BENCHMARK REPORT

The recently published report by the Cambridge English Language Assessment shows that learners in Church schools at Form 4 outperform those in State schools in the writing exam and this difference is statistically significant. This is confirmed by the Statistical Report of the MATSEC Board, year after year. The Times of Malta, on May 26, gave the impression that according to the Cambridge report, State schools may be producing better writers than their private and Church run counterparts. However, according to the Cambridge report, the success of State schools refers to the Year 5 cohort.

It is important to note that the Cambridge report has only studied the Year 5 and Form 4 learners. It insists that variations were observed within each school sector and no individual school sector was associated with a clustering of only high or only low-performing learners.

The Secretariat for Catholic Education and the Church Schools Association, which became aware of the Cambridge report through the media, have committed themselves to study this report and its implications, and take necessary action.

Corroboration of the Year 5 results, as mentioned in the Cambridge report, can be done by comparing the results of the Year 6 English Benchmark exam. The Year 6 English Benchmark exam is taken a year after the Cambridge test and also has the four components of speaking, listening, reading and writing. Although there are differences between the two exams, one can still make comparisons and distinctions. Unfortunately, the Year 6 Benchmark report does not produce detailed information by school sector, probably to avoid comparison between State, Church and Independent schools. We believe that Church schools do well in the Benchmark exam.

The Cambridge report also points out that the Maltese education system aims at bilingualism which prepares individuals to be equally fluent in both Maltese and English. It is well-known that bilingual competence developed since childhood is different in nature from a monolingual one with languages added later on in life. This means that there is a difference between children growing up learning and using two languages and children using one language.

The Cambridge study only captures the English proficiency of learners at Year 5 and Form 4 as measured in alignment with the Common European Framework of Reference levels, which are not designed to represent bilingual competence. Further study in this area is needed in order to take bilingual competence into account.

Overall, the Cambridge report gives a positive impression of English proficiency by learners in Maltese schools, sheds more light on what is happening and makes several recommendations. Further discussion of the report and its implications should lead to further development hopefully in all schools.

Secretariat for Catholic Education and Church Schools Association