GOOD: COULD BE BETTER

MATSEC Access Arrangements for Special Needs Candidates with reference to candidates suffering from ADHD, Autism or Dyslexia Conditions

AN OWN INITIATIVE REPORT
BY THE
OMBUDSMAN
COMMISSIONER FOR EDUCATION
JULY 2017
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Professor Charles Farrugia
Commissioner for Education
Office of the Ombudsman

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PART 1

The Purpose of the Study
A. Good: Could be better?

The Commissioner for Education at the Office of the Ombudsman undertook this study to establish whether students with special education needs sitting for the SEC and Matriculation examinations receive all the access support they require to overcome fully the obstacles imposed by their conditions.

The Commissioner was spurred to undertake this analysis by parents of special education needs candidates who on one hand appreciate the value of the current special arrangements offered during examinations, and on the other hand feel that these do not go far enough and should be upgraded. Consequently, this work is not an inquiry in the form usually conducted by the Commissioner for Education in the sense that it was not initiated following a formal complaint.

Therefore, this study is not an investigation into the workings of the University’s ACCESS Committee or the MATSEC Board since the Commissioner is aware and appreciates the work that the two entities carry out to those who deserve support. Instead, it has three objectives.

First, it presents the perspectives of the parents of candidates with special education needs of the obstacles their children face when they sit for the SEC and Matriculation examinations. Second, it provides parents in general with a document to help them understand the complex issues involved when their children sit for these national examinations and how the University authorities seek to deal with them. Third, the study can serve as an additional tool for the University authorities to understand more comprehensively the concerns of these candidates and their parents. Such a tool can be particularly useful at a time when the Institution itself is reviewing its ACCESS and examination policies.

Due to time limitations, the Commissioner was constrained to concentrate on the needs of candidates suffering from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism, or Dyslexia & Dyscalculia.

In this study, the Commissioner has purposely refrained from comparing the access support provided by the University of Malta with those available in other countries. The circumstances are different and what applies to one examination jurisdiction does not necessarily apply to another. For example, comparisons are often made about the Maltese Language entry requirement by the University of Malta and the requirement of Gaelic by Irish Universities. One would immediately understand that the use of the Maltese language in Malta differs drastically from the use of Gaelic in Ireland. The same argument applies to other comparisons.
B. The structure of this document

Apart from this introduction, the document contains six other parts with Parts 2, 3 and 4 written as stand-alones.

These three parts deal with the three categories of special learning conditions referred to earlier. Each part first provides a brief description of the condition and its effects on the scholastic development of SEC and Matriculation age students. The Commissioner quotes these descriptions from experts in the field who explain the condition in a manner that can be understood by most readers. The descriptions can alert parents to seek help should they note any of the symptoms in their children. If they do so, they must not jump to conclusions but should seek the advice of educational psychologists or special education needs professionals.

The second sections in Parts 2, 3 and 4 provide information on the Examination Access Arrangements (EAA) that the University’s ACCESS Disability Support Committee (ADSC) can approve and which the MATSEC Support Unit provides. The original intention was that the first and second sections would be interspaced with data on the number of Maltese and Gozitan students in Forms 3, 4 and 5 who are certified to suffer from the relevant condition and who receive State Learning Support Assistance (LSA). Unfortunately, for reasons beyond the Commissioner’s control, this information was not provided by the relevant authorities. A second set of tables provides the number of special education needs candidates in the three categories under review, who sat for SEC examinations in 2014, 2015 and 2016 and their success rate compared to other candidates.

The third section lists the comments and suggestions presented to the Commissioner by representatives of ADHD-Malta, the Autism Parents Association (Malta) and the Malta Dyslexia Association. The comments and suggestions presented by the representatives of one association are often repeated by members of the other two, and in order to avoid unnecessary repetitions, most comments are only reproduced once.

Part 5 records the reactions of the University’s ADSC to the parents’ comments and suggestions contained in the previous parts. It should be stressed that when presenting the parents’ views and the University’s reactions, the Commissioner does not necessarily endorse them in their entirety. He records them as accurately as possible for the sake of fairness and balance, but reserves his comments to his Observations in Part 6.

The final part lists the persons who contributed to this study as well as contacts information which readers may find useful.
The Commissioner conducted this study under the Own-Initiative Investigation proviso of the Ombudsman Act of 1995 and in cognisance of the Education-Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act of 2000 CAP.413, the University's Assessment Regulations of 2009, as well as its Guidelines to MATSEC Examinations ACCESS Arrangements, 2015. This study is intended for the general public and does not constitute an academic research paper, even if the information presented here is valid and reliable. It was carried out in the three-month period from April to June 2017.

Professor Charles Farrugia, Ph.D. (Lond.)
Commissioner for Education
July 2017

An electronic version of this report can be viewed on www.ombudsman.org.mt
PART 2
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Section A in Part 2 describes symptoms normally demonstrated by persons suffering from ADHD and is intended for those who wish to know more about the condition. Parents who note any of these symptoms should not jump to conclusions but should seek professional advice. Section B lists the access arrangements provided to ADHD candidates. Table 1 in Section C compares the success rate of ADHD candidates with that of other candidates sitting for Maltese, English and Mathematics in 2014, 2015 and 2016. Section D lists the main comments and suggestions by parents of ADHD candidates sitting for SEC and Matriculation examinations. The University’s reactions to these comments can be found in Part 5. Readers should note that Part 4 deals with candidates suffering from both ADHD as well as Dyslexia.

A. What is ADHD?

The United Kingdom Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Association explains that people with this condition tend to demonstrate:

- **impulsivity** through premature and thoughtless actions;
- **hyperactivity** through restless and shifting excess of movement; and
- **inattention** through a disorganised style preventing sustained effort.¹

NETDOCTOR, an Internet site devoted to health issues, states that ADHD conditions “… refer to a range of problem behaviours associated with poor attention span.” It goes on to explain that a person with ADHD may exhibit two different types of symptoms, namely, hyperactive-impulsive or inattentive behaviour.

Young people demonstrate **hyper-impulsive** behaviour when they:

- fidget with or tap hands or squirm in their seat;
- leave their seat in situations when remaining seated is expected (e.g. leave their place in the classroom);
- are continuously ‘on the go’ acting as if ‘driven by a motor’ (e.g. are unable or uncomfortable being still for an extended time in restaurants or meetings or difficult to keep up with); and
- talk excessively and blurt out answers before questions have been

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¹ “What is ADHD?” at AADD-UK (2017): www.aadduk.org
completed (e.g. complete other people’s sentences; cannot wait for their turn in conversation or waiting in a line).

The inattentive ADHD symptoms, include:

- failing to give close attention to details or make careless mistakes in schoolwork or during other activities (e.g. overlook or miss details, their work is inaccurate);

- having difficulty sustaining attention in tasks and play activities (e.g. have difficulty remaining focussed during lessons, conversations or lengthy reading);

- do not listen when spoken to directly (e.g. their mind seems to be elsewhere, even in the absence of obvious distraction);

- having difficulties organising tasks and activities (e.g. have difficulty managing sequential tasks, difficulty keeping materials and belongings in order, messy, disorganised work, have poor time management, fail to meet deadlines);

- losing things necessary for tasks and activities (e.g. school materials, pencils, books, tools, wallets, keys, paperwork, eyeglasses and mobile telephones); and

- being easily distracted by extraneous stimuli (e.g. for older adolescents and adults this may include unrelated thoughts) and forgetfulness in daily activities.\(^2\)

It should be stressed that most people show one or more of these symptoms at one time or another, and that not all ADHD sufferers demonstrate all the above symptoms all the time.

It is estimated that around three to five per cent of the population, mostly children, have ADHD with boys being more likely than girls to be affected by the condition. Many ADHD sufferers also have the dyslexia condition (see Part 4).

\(^2\) Adapted from a review by Chris Steer (2014) in NETDOCTOR at www.netdoctor.co.uk
B. ADHD – SEC & Matriculation Examination Access Arrangements

The University’s ADSC and MATSEC Board acknowledge a student as suffering from ADHD on the presentation of certification from a psychologist or psychiatrist. These must describe the type and degree of impact that ADHD has on the candidate’s functioning in examinations.

The ADSC provides EAA on the principle that these:

- must neither disadvantage candidates nor give them an unfair advantage over other candidates;
- must be such that they do not mislead users of the certificate about the candidate’s attainment; and
- should not reduce the validity and reliability of the assessment and must not compromise the integrity of the examination.

The MATSEC Support Unit offers candidates with ADHD the following EAA:

For SEC level examinations:

1. A prompter

“Prompters are assigned to draw candidates’ attention back to the examination task when the candidate’s attention appears to wander away from the examination task.”

Prompters also guide students when they devote far too much time answering one question and ignore the rest.

2. A room with fewer students to reduce noise and distractions.

3. Up to a maximum of 25% supervised rest periods or, in exceptional circumstances, extra time.

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3 Further details can be found in the University’s Guidelines to MATSEC Examinations Access Arrangements, 2015.
4 Ibid. p. 9.
5 The descriptions in italics are quoted from the University’s Guidelines referred to above.
“Rest breaks are given to candidates who, for various reasons, are unable to complete the examination without a break. When supervised rest breaks are granted, the duration of the break will not be deducted from the time allowed for the examination component but will be compensated for after the normal exam time has passed.”

For Matriculation level examinations:

1. Up to a maximum of 15% supervised rest periods.

C. Success rate of ADHD candidates sitting for SEC compared to other candidates

Table 2 provides data on the number of ADHD candidates who sat for the SEC examination in the last three years. Maltese, English and Mathematics are chosen since all students seeking University entry require these subjects. Similarly, their success rate up to Grade 5 is identified since the grade denotes the minimum accepted for Malta University entry. The numbers in brackets represent the number of non-special needs candidates and their results.

Table 1 ADHD success rate compared to other candidates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Obtained Grades 1-5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 2014</td>
<td>Maltese</td>
<td>82 (4502)</td>
<td>36 = 43.9% (2978 = 66.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>93 (5146)</td>
<td>44 = 47.3% (3210 = 62.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>95 (5049)</td>
<td>33 = 34.7% (2736 = 54.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2015</td>
<td>Maltese</td>
<td>86 (4151)</td>
<td>30 = 34.9% (2790 = 67.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>90 (4733)</td>
<td>40 = 44.4% (2975 = 62.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>77 (4375)</td>
<td>16 = 20.7% (2351 = 53.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2016</td>
<td>Maltese</td>
<td>71 (4166)</td>
<td>26 = 36.6% (2720 = 65.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>74 (4611)</td>
<td>41 = 55.4% (3022 = 65.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>75 (4597)</td>
<td>24 = 32.0% (2488 = 54.1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 was compiled from data provided by the MATSEC Support Unit.
For those unfamiliar with interpreting data from tables, the first line of Table 1 provides the following information: in May 2014, 82 ADHD and 4502 other candidates sat for the Maltese SEC exam; of these 36 or 43.9% ADHD candidates and 2978 or 66.1% other candidates obtained a Grade from 1 to 5, meaning that the pass rate of the other candidates was 22.2% better than ADHD candidates, and so on for the other subjects.

The data in the above table reveals other interesting information. First, the fact that the number of ADHD candidates seeking EAA decreased over the three-year period. No pattern in the results emerges except that these candidates seem to perform best in English and worst in Mathematics in contrast to other candidates who attain the best results in Maltese and the worst in Maths. Table 1 also shows that overall, other candidates attain 20.2% better results than ADHD sufferers.

D. Comments and Suggestions by representatives of ADHD Malta

Parents appreciate the work being carried out by the ADSC and the MATSEC Support Unit. However, they feel that these entities should note and act on the points listed below.

1. Parents do not understand why the EAA for candidates sitting for SEC are not replicated for Matriculation examinations. They argue that if ADHD candidates need assistance at SEC level, they still suffer from the same condition two years later when sitting for the Matriculation examination. Consequently, they should be afforded the same facilities.

2. Parents contend that the University’s ADSC tends to be less understanding and flexible in granting EAA than examination jurisdictions overseas. They feel that while the philosophy contained in the ACCESS Guidelines are to be highly commended, their application tends to follow the one-size-fits-all principle.

3. They suggest that the MATSEC Board should consider replacing some written exams by oral ones, citing the example of ‘comprehension tests’ where ADHD candidates fully understand the contents and are able to provide good spoken answers, but find difficulty doing so in writing.

4. Parents request that the services of ‘prompters’ and ‘readers’ should be of a higher quality. Parents suggest that the latter, and invigilators in general, should undergo specific training to deal adequately with Special Education Needs candidates.
5. The Committee’s representatives urge the MATSEC Support Unit and the schools to agree on the type of EAA to be provided so that facilities provided at school would mirror those offered during the actual examinations. This would enhance the candidates’ feeling of familiarity and security when they sit for examinations. They also suggest that LSAs should be allowed in the examination hall to enhance the candidates’ sense of security even if LSAs would not be allowed to help the candidates in any way.

6. Parents lament about the fees charged by privately-engaged Special Needs professionals who present reports required to accompany requests for EAA. Parents seek private help when the State’s reports take too long to be of use. They quote charges ranging from €600 to €700 for an initial report and €400 to €500 for follow-ups. Parents cite instances where families declined to seek assistance because of the costs involved. They urge the Ministry for Education and the University to address this unfair and discriminatory situation.

7. Parents also urge the University and other tertiary level education institutions to continue providing assistance to students with special needs once they joined tertiary level courses. They claim that students with some handicaps get assistance, while others do not.6

6 The ADHD Malta representatives made further suggestions similar to those by the representatives of the Malta Dyslexia Association and the Malta Autism Parents Association.
PART 3

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Condition (ASC)
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Condition (ASC)

Section A of Part 3 describes symptoms normally demonstrated by persons suffering from the Autism spectrum and is intended for those who wish to know more about the condition. Parents who note any of these symptoms should not jump to conclusions but should seek professional advice.

Section B lists the type of EAA that the University offers Autism candidates. Table 2 compares the success rate of Autism candidates with that of other candidates sitting for Maltese, English and Mathematics in 2014, 2015 and 2016. Section D lists the main comments and suggestions by parents of Autism candidates sitting for SEC and Matriculation examinations; the University’s reactions to these comments can be found in Part 5.

A. What is Autism?

The Autism-Europa Association states that:

“People on the autism spectrum experience persistent difficulties with social communication and social interaction, and might display restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviours, activities or interests...

...Autism is a ‘spectrum’ disorder, which means that the symptoms vary between individuals, ranging from mild to severe. People with autism include those who have significant intellectual disabilities and require a high level of support in their daily lives, as well as those who are of average to high intelligence and require a lower level of support.”

Amanda Morin, a parents’ advisor on special educational needs, identifies five areas where ASD/ASC effects student’s scholastic development. These are:

- Trouble recognising other people’s feelings and ‘reading’ nonverbal cues. They tend to be very literal. They don’t always understand puns, riddles or figures of speech.

- Difficulty with executive functioning. They find it hard to get organised and solve problems. They can struggle to keep their emotions in check and change the way they do things without getting upset.

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• A tendency to be distracted by sights, sounds, smells, touch and other information coming in through their senses.

• A tendency to be clumsy and uncoordinated. They may have trouble with handwriting, riding a bike, catching a ball or running.

• Trouble working with words. They could struggle to express themselves, follow conversations, and speak with the right volume and inflection.8

It should be stressed that not all Autism sufferers demonstrate all the above symptoms all the time.

It is estimated that autism effects one percent of the population, with Asperger’s Syndrome forming part of the spectrum.

B. Autism - SEC & Matriculation Examination Access Arrangements

The University of Malta recognises that candidates with an Autism Spectrum Condition may have difficulties with coursework and examinations because of one or more of the following factors:

• they feel anxious;

• they have difficulties with communication and social interaction;

• they may misinterpret instructions;

• they have unusual sensory reactions and may not cope well with, for instance, strip lighting, noise, strong smells, lecturer or invigilator walking about or a large exam hall; and

• they have difficulty staying ‘on task’.

To benefit from the University’s EAA, candidates need to support the request by relating their specific history and current functional impairment. A psychologist’s report must explain how the ASD/ASC symptoms have manifested across various settings over time, how the candidate has coped with the problems, and what success the candidate has had in coping.9

8 Adapted from: Amanda Morin’s “The Difference between Autism and Learning and Attention Issues” in www.understood.org.

9 Further details can be found in the University’s Guidelines for MATSEC Access Arrangements 2015.
The ADSC provides EAA on the principle that these:

- must neither disadvantage candidates nor give them an unfair advantage over other candidates;
- must be such that they do not mislead users of the certificate about the candidate's attainment; and
- should not reduce the validity and reliability of the assessment and must not compromise the integrity of the examination.¹⁰

The MATSEC Support Unit offers the following EAA to candidates with ASD/ASC.¹¹

For SEC level examinations

1. A prompter:

“Prompters are assigned to draw candidates’ attention back to the examination task when the candidate’s attention appears to be away from the examination task.”

2. A room with fewer students to reduce noise and distractions;

3. Up to a maximum of 25% extra time.

“Additional time may be allowed in most subjects and types of examination according to need. Additional time will not normally be permitted in an examination component where performance of a task in a limited time is itself an assessment objective (e.g. in the (SEC) Mathematics Paper 1 Section …”

The ADSC provides extra time to Autism candidates in Art and Graphical Communications.

For Matriculation level examinations:

1. A room with fewer students;

2. Up to a maximum of 15% extra time.

Other access arrangements at both levels may be considered on the basis of appropriate supportive evidence.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 9.
¹¹ The descriptions in italics are quoted from the University’s Guidelines referred to earlier.
C. Success rate of Autism Spectrum Candidates sitting for SEC compared to other candidates

Table 4 provides data on the number of Autism candidates who sat for the SEC examination in the last three years. Maltese, English and Mathematics are chosen since all students seeking University entry require these subjects. Similarly, their success rate up to Grade 5 is identified since the grade denotes the minimum accepted for Malta University entry. The numbers in brackets represent the number of non-special needs candidates and their results.

Table 2: Autism candidates’ success rate compared to other candidates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Obtained Grades 1-5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 2014</td>
<td>Maltese</td>
<td>9 (4502)</td>
<td>5 = 55.5% (2978 = 66.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>16 (5146)</td>
<td>8 = 50.0% (3210 = 62.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>12 (5049)</td>
<td>5 = 41.7% (2736 = 54.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2015</td>
<td>Maltese</td>
<td>15 (4151)</td>
<td>8 = 53.3% (2790 = 67.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>20 (4733)</td>
<td>7 = 35.0% (2975 = 62.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>21 (4375)</td>
<td>4 = 19.0% (2351 = 53.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2016</td>
<td>Maltese</td>
<td>18 (4166)</td>
<td>6 = 33.3% (2720 = 65.3%)</td>
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<td>English</td>
<td>23 (4611)</td>
<td>10 = 43.5% (3022 = 65.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>22 (4597)</td>
<td>7 = 31.8% (2488 = 54.1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 was compiled from data provided by the MATSEC Support Unit.

For those unfamiliar with interpreting data from tables, the first line of Table 2 provides the following information: in May 2014, 9 Autistic together with 4502 other candidates sat for the Maltese SEC exam; of these 5 or 55.5% autistic candidates and 2978 or 66.1% other candidates obtained a Grade from 1 to 5, meaning that the pass rate of the other candidates was 10.6% better than autistic candidates’ and so on for the other subjects.

Some of the cells in the above table are too small to be statistically significant, in fact no clear pattern of results emerges except that the number of candidates with Autism seeking assistance for SEC increased
over the three-year period. In 2014 and 2015, they performed best in Maltese, in 2016 in English, and worst in Mathematics in the three-year period. Overall, these students appear to perform 20.5% less well than other candidates.

**D. Comments and Suggestions by representatives of the Malta Autism Parents Association (MAPA)**

1. Parents point out the dichotomy of providing a reduced EAA to candidates sitting for the Matriculation examination than those sitting for SEC. They argue that the autism conditions persist without diminution during the two years between the two examinations and consequently, they suggest that the same support assistance should apply.

2. Parents and ex-candidates suffering from autism who sat for both examinations, request that the examination rooms should be quieter to exclude outside noise such as excessive traffic noise, horn-blowing, hawkers declaring their wares and people talking loudly to each other.

3. They suggest that examination papers should contain clear instructions, and be printed in the Verdana font and in a larger size, which candidates with the Autism spectrum find easier to read. They also suggest the avoidance of italics script and the use of coloured paper which render it easier for autism candidates to read text.

4. Parents lay great stress on the need to train invigilators on how to deal with candidates with special needs. Invigilators should refrain from expressing well-meaning exhortations, such as “Don’t stare, get on with your work!” which fluster rather than encourage the candidates. Parents also suggest that the presence of the candidate’s regular LSA would reduce the excessive anxiety habitually felt by Autism candidates during examinations.

5. Parents stress the need to allow Autistic candidates a wider use of word-processors to overcome their very poor handwriting, which deteriorates when they have to write rapidly against time limits, even when these are extended.

6. Representatives of the Maltese Autism Parents Association repeatedly stress the point that the University authorities should be more flexible regarding the Institution’s entry requirements. They cite the case of a candidate who performed brilliantly and obtained excellent results in

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12 These and other suggestions by representatives of the MAPA replicate those of representatives of ADHD Malta and the Malta Dyslexia Association.
all the subject sat for except for one, which s/he would not need for her/his chosen area of studies. Although the candidate sat for this particular subject several times, due to her/his condition, s/he has not succeeded to obtain a pass mark. Consequently s/he cannot enter University before s/he is 23 years old under the mature students’ clause.

7. In a similar vein, the parents argue that most autistic candidates find it difficult to cope with both English and Maltese and the University should re-consider the requirement to possess both languages for students with learning difficulties.

8. Parents feel that the University’s ACCESS Committee often ignores the contents of reports by warranted educational psychologists and learning disabilities specialists, on the premise that the latter base their reports on the instructions of the parents who paid for their services. They also complain that the Committee often ignored the research findings of Malta University academics.

9. Parents of autistic children claim that work policies by the Malta Union of Teachers do not help their children overcome their handicaps, and urge the union to work with the University to effect change rather than resist it. The MUT had not reacted to this claim by the time this report had gone to print.
PART 4

Dyslexia & Dyscalculia
Dyslexia & Dyscalculia

Section A of Part 4 describes symptoms normally demonstrated by persons suffering from Dyslexia or Dyscalculia, and is intended for those who wish to know more about the conditions. As stated earlier some of these students suffer also from ADHD. Parents who note any of these symptoms should not jump to conclusions but should seek professional advice. Section B lists the type of Examination Access Arrangements (EAA) that the University offers to Dyslexia and Dyscalculia candidates. Table 3 in Section C compares the success rate of the candidates who suffer from dyslexia as well as those who suffer from dyslexia coupled with ADHD with that of other candidates sitting for Maltese, English and Mathematics in 2014, 2015 and 2016. Candidates who suffer from ADHD only are not included in this part of the study since they are dealt with in Part 2. Section D lists the main comments and suggestions by parents of Dyslexia and Dyscalculia candidates sitting for SEC and Matriculation examinations. Other comments by parents of candidates with ADHD are contained in Part 2, while the University’s reactions to these comments can be found in Part 5.

A. What is Dyslexia?

Erica Patino, an expert on learning difficulties, defines the condition:

“Dyslexia is a brain-based condition. It causes difficulty with reading, spelling, writing and sometimes speaking. In people with dyslexia, the brain has trouble recognizing or processing certain types of information. This can include matching letter sounds and symbols and blending them together to make words.

Some people with dyslexia don’t have trouble sounding out or ‘decoding’ words. But they may struggle to understand what they read. It can be very hard for people with dyslexia to read in a way that’s automatic, or seemingly without effort.”

Ms Patino describes Dyscalculia, sometimes called ‘math dyslexia’, as the condition that:

“… causes problems for students when it comes to reading, writing and understanding numbers. While children with dyslexia struggle with letters and words, those with dyscalculia often:
• read numbers incorrectly;
• have trouble copying and writing math numbers and symbols;
• have trouble with math concepts, such as counting, measuring and estimating;
• struggle to master the “basics” (such as doing quick addition and subtraction in their head) that are key to working independently and efficiently.”

Not all dyslexia or dyscalculia students demonstrate all the symptoms all the time. It is estimated that four to five percent of the population suffer from dyslexia. There is no cure for the condition, but as they grow up people develop coping strategies to overcome many of its aspects.

B. Dyslexia & Dyscalculia – SEC and Matriculation Examination Access Arrangements

The University’s Access Committee groups dyslexia under candidates suffering from Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) whose:

“… range of learning difficulties is extensive and difficult to define. EAAs are made on the basis of an individual candidate’s needs. These may usually concern the candidate’s word recognition skills, writing and spelling skills, or speed of reading and writing. Candidates with SpLD are likely to experience difficulties in some of the areas listed below:

• **Reading Accuracy:** This would include candidates who are unlikely to be able to read the examination material with sufficient accuracy to avoid making mistakes which will affect the understanding of what they read.

• **Spelling:** This would include candidates with spelling difficulties that slow down their work rate or lead them to use alternate words which are easier to spell. Other candidates may have spelling difficulties that make their writing incomprehensible to the examiner.

• **Reading and Writing Speed:** This would be a particular problem where the speed of reading and writing is so slow that candidates lose the sense of what they read and write, or are unable to complete the examination within the stipulated time."

14 University of Malta: Guidelines to MATSEC Examinations Access Arrangements -2015.
• **Handwriting Legibility:** Some candidates may be unable to write legibly under time pressure; other candidates produce scripts that are illegible despite being allowed time to write more slowly.”

The ADSC provides EAA to candidates with the Dyslexia and Dyscalculia condition provided they are certified by an educational psychologist and/or a literary/dyslexia specialist.15

The ADSC provides EAA on the principle that these:

• must neither disadvantage candidates nor give them an unfair advantage over other candidates;

• must be such that they do not mislead users of the certificate about the candidate’s attainment; and

• should not reduce the validity and reliability of the assessment and must not compromise the integrity of the examination.16

**EAA for SEC examinations**

1. **25% extra time for all subjects except for Art, Mental Arithmetic, and Technical Design:**

“Additional time may be allowed in most subjects and types of examination according to need. Additional time will not normally be permitted in an examination component where performance of a task in a limited time is itself an assessment objective (e.g. in the (SEC) Mathematics Paper 1 Section A) or where candidates’ ability to demonstrate attainment within the allotted time is not normally affected by their impairment (e.g. in Art).”

2. **A Reader (under special conditions):**

“A reader will be allowed in certain subjects where a candidate has a significant impairment. When requested by the candidate, the reader will read instructions, questions, words or phrases as set down on the examination paper without explanation, translation or clarification.”

3. **A Word Processor (under special conditions):**

15 The descriptions in italics are quoted from the University’s Guidelines referred to above.
16 Ibid. p. 9.
“A word-processor is an EAA for candidates with dyspraxia and/or dyslexia whose degree of illegibility of handwriting has been clearly established or whose speed of writing is extremely slow. Samples of the candidate’s scripts produced under examination conditions should be submitted to show the candidate’s degree of illegibility.

The ADSC will consider each application for a word processor in relation to the assessment objectives of the subjects for which the candidate has registered.”

4. Spelling mistakes are not penalised except for language subjects.

For Matriculation level examinations:

1. 10% extra time for Pure and Applied Mathematics.

2. 15% extra time for all other subjects except for Graphical Communications, Engineering Drawing, AM Arts (Paper 1 & 2), PE Practical and Musical Performance.

SEC level candidates with dyscalculia may be granted up to 25% extra time in examinations which include calculations, except for the mental paper in Mathematics where speed is an assessment criterion.

Matriculation Certificate level, candidates with dyscalculia may be granted up to 10% extra time. Calculators and multiplication tables are not allowed when these are not permitted for other candidates.

C. Success rate of Dyslexia and Dyslexia with ADHD candidates sitting for SEC compared to other candidates

Table 5 provides data on the number of candidates suffering from Dyslexia and Dyslexia together with ADHD, who sat for the SEC examination in the last three years. The Dyslexia-ADHD candidates are in addition to those listed in Table 2. Maltese, English and Mathematics are chosen since all students seeking University entry require these subjects. Similarly, their success rate up to Grade 5 is identified since the grade denotes the minimum accepted for Malta University entry. The numbers in brackets represent the number of non-special needs candidates and their results.
### Table 3: Dyslexia-ADHD success rate compared to other candidates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Obtained Grades 1-5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 2014</td>
<td>Maltese</td>
<td>295 (4502)</td>
<td>74=25.1% (2978=66.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>337 (5146)</td>
<td>66=19.6% (3210=62.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>306 (5049)</td>
<td>63=20.6% (2736=54.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2015</td>
<td>Maltese</td>
<td>284 (4151)</td>
<td>77=27.1% (2790=67.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>316 (4733)</td>
<td>68=21.5% (2975=62.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>283 (4375)</td>
<td>55=19.4% (2351=53.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2016</td>
<td>Maltese</td>
<td>323 (4166)</td>
<td>82=25.4% (2720=65.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>349 (4611)</td>
<td>96=27.6% (3022=65.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>331 (4597)</td>
<td>87=26.3% (2488=54.1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 was compiled from data provided by the MATSEC Support Unit.

For those unfamiliar with interpreting data from tables, the first line of Table 5 provides the following information: in May 2014, 295 dyslexic & dyslexic-ADHD together with 4502 other candidates sat for the Maltese SEC exam; of these 74 or 25.5% dyslexic & dyslexic-ADHD candidates and 2978 or 66.1% other candidates obtained a Grade from 1 to 5, meaning that the pass rate of the other candidates was 41.1% better than dyslexic & dyslexic-ADHD candidates and so on for the other subjects.

Table 3 presents other interesting information. In 2016, 65 more Dyslexia-ADHD candidates registered for the three subjects than in 2014. More significantly, the results they attained, or failed to attain, reflect the difficulty their condition/s create when dealing with language subjects. On average, they perform 41% less well in Maltese and English than other candidates, no doubt due to the spelling requirement. In contrast, their results in Mathematics are 30 percent less favourable than other candidates.’
D. Comments and Suggestions by representatives of the Malta Dyslexia Association

Parents acknowledge that the University’s ACCESS Committee and the MATSEC Support Unit work hard to assist their children overcome their handicaps. They feel, however, that these authorities do not fully understand their children’s needs. They often replicate the comments made by parents of ADHD and Autistic candidates with the following additional ones.

1. Parents of students suffering from dyslexia feel particularly aggrieved that their children – like all other candidates - are allowed spelling mistakes in most subjects, but are penalized for spelling mistakes in languages when it is a well-known fact that dyslexia sufferers are extremely prone to spelling deficiencies. Parents argue that in this instance the ADSC does not provide their children with any assistance at all. One parent compared the insistence for dyslexic candidates to spell correctly in language subjects to one that allows a blind person to be accompanied by his guide dog everywhere, except in Valletta because he works there.

2. Parents of Dyscalculia candidates question the rational why they have to present a full literacy assessment when their children face specific Mathematical obstacles.

3. Parents point out the delays in the issuing of reports by the Ministry of Education Statementing Board. Although the delay has been reduced from two-and-a-half years to one year, this is still far too long for the purpose of obtaining assistance. Securing reports from private professionals is financially prohibitive for many families.

4. Parents regard the current SEC and Matriculation examinations setup as having too much of a gatekeeper mentality. They argue that greater use of ‘continuous assessment’ and ‘multiple-choice assessment’ methods would allow dyslexic candidates to demonstrate the real extent of their intellectual abilities and knowledge.

5. Parents suggest a much wider use of the available technologies, such as computers and calculators, during examination sessions. They argue that at school – and at home – their children continuously use these devices to overcome their disabilities, but are denied them in the examination hall. They insist that they do not want their children to take unfair advantages over other candidates: they just want their children to have a fair opportunity to prove their real intellectual worth.

6. Parents suggest that once students enter University, MCAST or ITS they should have stronger follow-up support than they have at present.
PART 5

ADSC’s Reactions to Parents’ Comments
ADSC’s Reactions to Parents’ Comments

This part of the report contains the University’s ADSC’s reactions to the comments and suggestions put forward by the parents of children with special needs about the Examination Access Arrangements offered to those sitting for SEC and Matriculation Examinations.

It should be noted that earlier this year the University Senate amended the Admissions Regulations to facilitate the recruitment of students with learning difficulties such as Autism, who wish to follow courses at the University. This resulted from a long consultation process with various stakeholders that included relevant organisations and individual parents. The revision of these policies is ongoing.

The ADSC verbatim reactions follow.

Section A

1. The UM-MATSEC Access Arrangements are based on the regulations of the Joint Council Qualification, UK. The principle that EAAs are different between SEC and MATSEC exams is because SEC certifies that the student has completed compulsory education whereas Matriculation examinations may mean that the student is seeking further qualifications therefore require a different level of understanding.

2. MATSEC examinations are national examinations and some form of standardization is essential to safeguard the principles of fair assessment. The ADSC reviews each application individually and arrangements are granted according to the needs of the student as highlighted through the scores of the assessments and the picture that includes history of need. There are many instances when the ADSC actually makes further recommendations for EAAs which were not made by the professionals or the schools. Such recommendations include the use of a word-processor which many students with dyspraxia find helpful. When the general picture given by the assessments does not qualify the candidate through the scores, extra time is given since the student presents border-line ability overall. This is not possible overseas where decisions are often made online.

3. This issue is to be addressed directly with the MATSEC Board
however the ADSC is of the opinion that different components of the examinations are assessing different skills and abilities and therefore are all important. Writing is a skill that is different from speaking. An examination that is assessed through writing would make it a completely different exam to a spoken one. Moreover, the assessment of oral examinations presents its own different problems that would be difficult to solve for public examinations such as the MATSEC examinations.

4. The ADSC provides regular training to the support staff employed by the Examinations Department. Only trained and certified support staff are recruited. Moreover, any complaints brought forward are addressed immediately and action taken.

5. Parents and schools are encouraged to follow the guidelines issued regularly by the UM-ADSC/MATSEC with regard to examination access arrangements. These guidelines provide comprehensive details of access arrangements, the basis for eligibility as well as other relevant information. The guidelines are also available online (http://www.um.edu.mt/matsec/regulations/Access).

The ADSC has created various opportunities in the system of application to allow students to apply for EAAs beforehand with the aim of supporting the school to mirror the same arrangements. The purpose is to ensure that students are aware of the arrangements they will be eligible for and therefore can practice whilst still at school. Moreover, students are able to apply for arrangements from Form IV and, as from two years ago, students who will be sitting for the VET exams and require access arrangements are informed of their eligibility in Form 3. The arrangements allowed for VET exams remain the same for O Level exams.

LSAs cannot be allowed in examination halls and the ADSC augurs that students sitting for their O Levels would have been taught to be more autonomous and not be dependent on the LSA. There have been very exceptional situations where the student’s LSA has been allowed in the exam hall. However, a justified request needs to be made to the ADSC for consideration.

Also in exceptional circumstances, arrangements can be made for the student to visit the venue and/or meet the support staff beforehand.

Overall however, one needs to keep in mind that national examinations are different to school examinations and while some arrangements are permitted at school, these might not at national assessment level. It is
important to note that students who follow a modified examination that is different from that of their peers cannot be granted such arrangements since SEC examinations are public examinations.

6. The ADSC and/or the MATSEC board do not take any responsibility for the fees charged by private practitioners. Moreover, the issue of the required necessary reports for the Statementing Board needs to be addressed with the Minister for Education.

The ADSC may suggest that these issues are discussed with the relevant psychologists' professional associations as well as with the Director General from the DQSE/DES and the Minister for Education. One should also add that the ADSC only requests one full psychological report for some candidates such as those on the Autism Spectrum or those with literacy difficulties. After that, an updated literacy report is required for the latter group.

7. It is not clear as to what sort of assistance is being required that is not provided. The coordinator at the ACCESS-Disability Support Unit meets with the students individually to discuss their personal and academic needs in order to provide them with course and examination access arrangements. Students should be taught coping skills and strategies prior to entering UoM so that they can become independent adults. Moreover, we commit to carry more outreach with schools on this matter together with Student Advisory Services.

Section B

1. The difference between the two levels is when the student qualifies for a reader and/or a prompter at SEC level. Both supports are not considered adequate for students who decide to pursue their academic careers which lead to various professions. (Please refer also to the reply given to point 1 of the points from the ADHD Association(s)).

2. Unfortunately, noise pollution is all over the island and the relevant authorities cannot be held responsible although they do their utmost to ensure a peaceful environment during exams. It is recommended that students may wish to wear ear-plugs during exams. This can be requested as an arrangement and there should be no difficulty granting permission for students to bring their own ear-plugs for the examinations.

3. A recent study carried out by MATSEC concluded that a large number of candidates prefer the Verdana and currently MATSEC is evaluating whether to use this font for exam papers. MATSEC already prints most of the exams on coloured paper. Students are allowed to use a
coloured overlay during exams if a request is made.
4. This has already been discussed in the previous section.

5. The ADSC allows students the use of a word processor provided by the examinations department only if a request is made and there is proof that this is the student’s mode of working.

6. This issue has been addressed in the recently updated amended admission regulation. Every application is seen individually.

7. However, it is to be noted that students should not be discouraged from learning Maltese and in their primary and secondary education they should be provided with the necessary materials that enable them to learn the language. There are many students with Autism who manage to follow a course at UoM and have acquired all the necessary qualifications.

8. The guidelines for examination access arrangements are very clear about eligibility. However on rare occasions professionals request arrangements which are not justified by the report written. Where a case is made, the request is discussed and often acceded to provided it is a reasonable arrangement that is justified for the relevant disability or condition.

Section C

1. Spelling is not penalised in non-language subjects. In language subjects, one cannot ignore spelling mistakes because this is one of the components that are assessed.

2. A full psychological report, carried out at any time during the child’s educational life, is required **one time only.** A literacy update report is required regularly since the student may improve. Moreover a literacy report is also important because it may reveal other underlying issues.

3. These issues need to be addressed to the relevant authorities such as D.E.S.

4. Students already have the possibility to be assessed in the suggested manner when choosing a VET subject. Moreover, this issue is being addressed in the new Learning Outcomes Framework: http://www.schoolslearningoutcomes.edu.mt/en/

5. The tools allowed in the examination halls vary and depend on what is being assessed.
PART 6

Observations and Recommendations by the Commissioner for Education
Observations and Recommendations by the Commissioner for Education

A. Special needs candidates are on the Increase

First the figures: Tables 1, 2 and 3 show that the number of SEC examination candidates seeking assistance for access arrangements from the University’s ADSC and the MATSEC Board is on the increase. The highest number of candidates seeking and obtaining EAA are those with the ADHD and Dyslexia conditions, while those suffering from Autism register the smallest number.

It will be a rush conclusion to surmise from these figures that the incidence of students with special education needs among the Maltese population is growing. It is far more likely that a larger number of parents\(^{17}\) of children with special education needs have developed a greater sensitivity about the conditions that afflict their children and are seeking assistance in larger numbers. School teachers’ awareness and alertness contribute further to the cognisance for the need of special help. In this respect, it would be most worrying if the claims by parents prove correct, namely that some families refrain from seeking help because they find the State’s ‘statementing’ process too long and reports by privately-engaged specialists too costly. The Ministry for Education and Employment and the University – even if the ADSC seems to wash its hands of the matter\(^{18}\) – with the assistance of the Commissioner for Education if required, should investigate this claim further and take the necessary action to eliminate discrimination on financial grounds.

B. Special needs candidates perform less well than other candidates

The above tables demonstrate in no uncertain terms that candidates with special education needs perform less well in SEC exams than other students. The data is consistent over the three years 2014-2016 and in the three selected subjects as reflected in the summative Table 4. It shows that the success rate of candidates with the identified conditions is less than half that of other candidates.

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\(^{17}\) Henceforth referred to simply as ‘parents’.

\(^{18}\) See Part 5 Sections A.6 and C.3
However, one must not rush to the conclusion that the figures prove conclusively that special needs candidates perform less well than other candidates entirely due to:

a) either their innate conditions;

b) or insufficient access support by the University.

It is reasonable to conclude that the results emerge from a combination of both factors. Further studies are needed to establish firm conclusions.

Tables 1, 2 and 3 provide other revealing information. Candidates suffering from Autism (Table 2) do not establish any clear patterns. For example, they performed best in Maltese in 2014 and worse in the same subject in 2016. Candidates who suffer only from ADHD (Table 1) obtained the best results in English and the worst in Maltese. Table 3 demonstrates clearly that candidates suffering from Dyslexia and Dyslexia-ADHD perform very poorly in Maltese and English with an average of 40% less achievement than other candidates. In this case, it is obvious that their innate inability to spell correctly contributes to the poor results especially when they are refused any assistance to overcome this handicap.

C. Higher degree of understanding needed

Parents appreciate the work carried out by the ADSC and the MATSEC Board and they certainly do not want their children’s certificates to be of lesser value or validity than the real thing.

Parents are also convinced that a deeper understanding by the members of these entities of the obstacles faced by their children when sitting for the national examinations would lead to a more flexible attitude. In turn,
such an approach would lead to better access facilities and improved examination results. In this respect, the ADSC’s response to the parents’ comments is disappointing. Its cold, officious tone reflects a reluctance to engage positively with parents’ concerns. Its self-righteous tone echoes the old University attitude of “we know best”, a stance that parents greatly resent as reflected in their remarks of “one-size-fits-all”, “lack of flexibility” and “gate-keeper function” recorded earlier. The Commissioner suggests that the ADSC should re-examine the parents’ comments with a higher degree of sensitivity than that demonstrated in the reactions reproduced in Part 5.

On the other hand, parents need to appreciate more the University’s duty to safeguard the validity of MATSEC certificates. The latter is wary of granting concessions that weaken the Certificates’ local and international recognition, or of introducing measures that disadvantage other candidates. The ADSC attempts to balance the two sources of pressure as it states in its ACCESS document:

“The ADSC and the MATSEC Board recognise the rights of persons with disability to access examinations with the appropriate arrangements. They also recognise that it is their duty to ascertain fair assessment that takes into account each person’s impairment.

These arrangements are intended to allow the students’ attainment to be demonstrated by facilitating access to the examination while ensuring that the validity of the examination is upheld. In so doing, such provisions do not alter the assessment demands of the qualifications.”

Furthermore, parents should understand the complexities of organising and administering national examinations twice annually for thousands of candidates involving scores of subjects. The logistics can be overwhelming for a poorly resourced Unit. In this case, the University and the State should put their money where their mouth is and provide the finance to actuate the aims of the Education-Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act of 2000.

That said, the MATSEC Support Unit can and should cater for straightforward administrative requests such as exam-questions printed in larger and appropriate fonts on sepia-coloured paper. It should insist on clear and simpler examination instructions, and ensure quieter venues. Similarly, the presence of appropriately trained prompters, readers and invigilators to deal with the difficulties faced by special needs candidates should not prove unsurmountable. These are reasonable requests; the

one seeking the presence of the candidate’s LSA for the duration of the examination session is not and the ADSC is correct to reject it. It is also noteworthy that the ADSC and the MATSEC Board have already taken steps to address these issues. Such improvements involve extra administrative chores and cost money, but will certainly be worth the effort if they provide candidates with disabilities better results and higher prospects to tertiary level education.

D. Greater use of oral and multiple-choice assessment modes

Parents note with satisfaction an increased use of “continuous” assessments, where candidates’ work at school contributes to the final SEC and Matriculation examination results. The Commissioner recommends that this sound educational practice should be extended further for all candidates.

Parents suggest a greater use of ‘oral’ examinations to replace some ‘written’ ones, as well as the wider use of multiple-choice tests. They cite the example of ‘comprehension’ tests where students know the answers but find it difficult to express them in written form. They claim that the continental “viva voce” examination approach is a more valid one to overcome their children’s needs. The ADSC’s response to this proposal is not clear.

Both requests present administrative as well as educational challenges because these assessment modes are not so familiar in our educational system at the Secondary School level. The Commissioner recommends that the MATSEC Support Unit should explore further these modes of assessment and introduce them gradually if it is confirmed that they provide candidates with special needs improved opportunities to demonstrate their true level of achievement. In such instances, examiners have to establish whether it is sufficient to ‘know’ the answer and be able to express it verbally or by ticking the right box, or whether the test demands candidates to demonstrate their knowledge through a coherent written answer. In both cases, examiners have to reconsider the learning objectives of the subjects concerned and construct the examining mode accordingly. Multiple-choice assessments should not be dismissed, as they often are, as hit-or-miss affairs. One notes that they are the preferred mode of assessment in the high intellectually demanding and multifarious sphere of medical education. Ignoring the proposal is not good enough.
E. Use of technical devices

Parents request, demand almost, that the MATSEC Board should allow their children a much wider use of technological aids than it does at present. One group of parents stated: “Students should be allowed to use technologies that overcome their disabilities and demonstrate their mastery of content material.”

A wider use of computers and calculators during SEC and Matriculation examinations present the University with some formidable challenges. Here, the question of validity and recognition of its certificates looms high, as it should.

Parents counter-argue that computers feature prominently in their children's lives. These devices also are paramount in the children's education and literary communications. Consequently, they stress that their children should be allowed to use this equipment to express their knowledge, views and answers to examination questions when handwritten efforts do not do them justice.

Parents of Dyslexia-ADHD candidates justifiably claim that the ADSC and MATSEC Board do not help their children in any way when the latter’s spelling mistakes in language subjects are penalised to the same extent of other candidates. Data in Table 3 support this argument by demonstrating that these students' success rate in Maltese and English is 40% lower than other candidates. In the process, parents argue, the University deprives these candidates the opportunity to pursue tertiary education when they possess the intellectual capacity to do so with profit. It is in this context that parents use MATSEC's “gate-keeper” label with obvious sorrow. Furthermore the ADSC’s dismissal in Section C.1 about this sensitive issue is not reassuring. The Commissioner strongly suggests that the ADSC and the MATSEC Board should review its position on this matter: spelling is not as an important element in language learning as ADSC requirements make it out to be. British, American, Australian and Indian English modes coexist concurrently with their spelling variants. The fact remains that the current examination arrangements do not assist Dyslexic candidates in this regard, and it is unfortunate that the ADSC response dismissed the parents' concerns so offhandedly.

The use of computers and calculators during examinations present several administrative difficulties if the University has to provide the equipment unless the candidates are allowed to bring their own. However, they should not pose real educational concerns if the University authorities decide to think-out-of-the-box regarding this issue. Word-processing technology has become part of our lives, and if examination candidates...
use it with proper supervision, they would not jeopardize the validity of the University’s certificates. All tertiary level students present their assignments and other forms of communication in electronic formats where spell-checks are in constant use. Employers do not think less of their clerks or managers if these spell-check their written interactions. No one faults account-clerks or warranted accountants for using calculators. Engineers and architects invariably opt for the use of scientific calculators in preference to printed mathematical tables. Academics spell-check their papers before submitting them for publication. Indeed, one has to keep in mind that spelling is only one of the components of language learning. Grammar, syntax and context –among others– are more important ones. Word processors form an indispensable part of our modern communication processes and it is counterproductive to prohibit their use especially when they help intellectually capable students overcome their handicaps. Opponents of these arguments point to the possibilities of copying or plagiarising, but the technology exists to prevent abuse. From the educational aspect, the Commissioner maintains that the wider use of electronic technology would encourage examiners to pose examination questions that promote creativity and problem-solving answers rather than the regurgitating of inert knowledge.

F. Maltese as a University entry requirement

The Maltese language requirement for University entry presents a formidable conundrum compounded by nationalistic sentiments, innuendos of snobbish elitism and political hesitancy.

Supporters of Maltese insist that the retention of the Language as a University entry requirement ensures its survival and development. At the opposite end, parents of children with special education needs claim that their children often cannot tackle two languages as part of their curriculum. Unfortunately, language specialists do not agree on the issue, only to spread confusion, claims and counter-claims. It would be extremely unfair if, as a result of the perplexity, candidates with special needs are denied post-secondary and tertiary education. The Commissioner’s experience in this area suggests that one major source of the problem emerges from the nature of the Maltese SEC paper. The Commissioner suggests that if the exam paper were to be restructured to emphasise more the communicative and less the linguistic aspect of the subject, Maltese will not present the obstacles it currently does, even if the Literature section is retained.
G. Conclusions

This study shows that parents of children with special needs believe that the ADSC and MATSEC Board can do more to help their children prove their true potential, obtain better examination results and proceed to tertiary education. The study shows that they have a strong point. At the same time, the Commissioner for Education acknowledges the efforts of the two University entities to provide proper EAA to candidates facing intellectual obstacles. He interprets the results of this study as a need for the University to adopt a more liberal approach to the EAA it offers. Arrangements such as larger and appropriate fonts on sepia coloured paper and quitter venues are being tackled; similarly, the presence of better trained personnel in the examination halls. Greater availability and use of electronic technologies demands of the University a bolder and a more innovative approach. One remembers the furore at the time the Institution was contemplating the removal of Latin as a compulsory entry requirement, now most people look back at all the fuss with amusement. The Commissioner augurs that the same fate will face the opposition to greater use of technologies in examinations, and not just for candidates with special needs.

Requests by the parents of students with special needs initiated the motivation for this study, which coincided with the University of Malta Senate decision to review its Examination Access Arrangements provided for SEC and Matriculation candidates. The Commissioner for Education offers this study as a further tool to deal with the issues concerned. The contents should not be used to criticise or fault the ADSC or the MATSEC Board: this for three reasons.

First, this study shows that the two entities have been and are working hard to help candidates with special educational needs overcome the obstacles that prevent them from attaining better results. In spite of the reactions in Part 5, a fresh way of liberal thinking among ADSC members is emerging and this study wants to acknowledge and reinforce the new sentiments.

Second, the shortcomings often emerge from forces beyond the control of the two bodies. Ultra-conservative elements in the academic body, financial constraints and a reluctance to make bold political decisions impact negatively on the decisions of the ADSC and MATSEC Board.

Third, the two entities should be commended not criticised when they strive to ensure that the University’s SEC and Matriculation Certificates
retain their validity and international recognition. Indeed, parents of candidates with special education needs do not want their children’s certificates to lose their educational currency. Neither do they want anyone to imply or suspect that the SEC and Matriculation Certificates awarded to their children are of a lesser value than those awarded to other candidates. Nor do they wish their children to gain unfair advantages over other candidates.

The Commissioner endorses parents’ requests for better access arrangements that enable their children to sit for the national examinations on a truly level ground with other candidates. Parents repeatedly stressed to the Commissioner that they want the University authorities to treat their children as “Different But Equal” to other candidates. One augurs that this study will contribute towards this end.
PART 7

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Acknowledgments and thanks

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Mr Gilbert Zahra, Principal Subject Area Officer, Assessment, Research and Development at the MATSEC Support Unit, University of Malta. Email: gilbert.j.zahra@um.edu.mt

Ms Marchita Mangiafico, Administrative Assistant, ACCESS Disability Support Unit, University of Malta. Email: marchita.mangiafico@um.edu.mt
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Professor Charles Farrugia
Commissioner for Education
Office of the Ombudsman
E-Mail: ceduc@ombudsman.org.mt