

REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL END-OF-PRIMARY CYCLE ASSESSMENT: THE BENCHMARK

Report commissioned by the Permanent Secretary,
Ministry for Education and Employment
and
submitted by the Benchmark Review Board
for the consideration of the Permanent Secretary

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**Ministry for Education and Employment
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2017, Dr Francis Fabri, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry for Education and Employment, set up the Benchmark Review Board. The terms of reference required the Board to look into the national end-of-primary assessment referred to as 'the Benchmark' and in so doing consult with all stakeholders involved in this assessment. The Review Board went about tapping and mapping out the experiences, opinions, and suggestions of a broad range of stakeholders by means of questionnaire surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews.

In all, 562 parents/guardians of Year 6 children, Year 6 teachers and Year 7 teachers of Maltese/English/Mathematics from across State, Church and Independent schools participated in the three questionnaire surveys. In addition, 388 stakeholders ranging from Year 6 and Year 7 students (including migrant students and students with exam access arrangements) to paper setters and markers, to school and college leaders, to officials from the State and Church school sector, participated in one of 40 focus groups. These were followed by four one-on-one interviews with top directorate and MEDE officials, bringing the number of stakeholders who participated in the wide-ranging consultation process to 954.

The 25 recommendations that the Review Board is presenting are organised according to the terms of reference, and followed by a verbalisation of the relevant findings arising from the consultation process. A small number of recommendations are the product not only of the consultation process but also of the Review Board's deliberations on the outcomes of the consultation process and its understanding as to the best way forward. The appendix to this report, which will be made available on the Ministry for Education and Employment website - <https://education.gov.mt> reproduces a summary of all the findings of the three questionnaire surveys (including all open-ended comments), reports on the salient points arising from all of the 40 focus groups, and transcripts of the most salient points from the four interviews.

INTRODUCTION

“Education should not force kids to do stuff. It should help them discover and want to make them discover.” (Year 7 students)

“Priorities (in learning and teaching) would change if there is no Benchmark; it is what is killing the joy of teaching.” (Year 6 teacher)

On 10th October 2017 the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry for Education and Employment set up the Benchmark Review Board charged with looking into the national end-of-primary assessment referred to as ‘the Benchmark’. The motivation and terms of reference were as follows:

The Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education and Employment has felt the need that, after our country has been making use of the National End-of-Primary Cycle Assessment (known as the Benchmark) since 2011, this assessment process should be reviewed according to the experiences and the results acquired over these years. The Benchmark assesses more than 90% of 11-year-old students in Maltese, English, and Mathematics. The languages are assessed according to the four skills – namely, writing, reading, understanding, and speaking – while in Mathematics students have to answer a mental and a written paper.

The time has come to enquire:

- Is the assessment method of the Benchmark appropriate for the 21st century, at a time when there are diverse methods of teaching and the digital world has become an integral part of teaching and life?*
- Is the Benchmark a just and inclusive method of assessment that allows all students to show what they have learnt and acquired during their primary years?*
- Are the questions asked in this assessment truly a benchmark of what an 11- year-old student is expected to know, understand, and be able to do?*
- What use is being made of the Benchmark results so as to ensure that the teaching and learning practices in the classroom evolve for the benefit of all students? Are the results of the Benchmark being put to good and desirable use?*

In the context of the local situation and history of this national assessment, the Board has to answer the above queries and to put forward concrete proposals on how the process of national assessment in this phase of My Journey could be more valid and relevant and on how to improve the results acquired so far. The Board has to consult with all stakeholders involved in this assessment

The Board was composed as follows:

Professor Mark G. Borg (chairperson)
Ms Franklan Debono
Ms Joanne Rita Grima
Mr David Muscat
Mr Louis Scerri
Ms Alison Tabone Mirasole
Ms Esmeralda Zerafa

The Board held regular meetings as follows:

24th and 31st October 2017
9th, 15th, 23rd and 28th November 2017
14th and 21st December 2017
4th and 26th January 2018
7th and 27th February 2018
22nd March 2018
16th and 25th May 2018

In its first meeting the Board identified the broad range of stakeholders that are to be consulted about various aspects of the Benchmark. The methodology employed is discussed hereunder. The following target actions and time frame was agreed upon.

TARGET ACTION	TIME FRAME
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction of three questionnaires to be used in the surveys among parents/guardians, Year 6 teachers, and Year 7 teachers of Maltese, English, and Mathematics 	November 2017
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Piloting of questionnaires and production of final versions • Formulation of 15 different schedules of questions to be used in focus groups with a wide range of stakeholders 	November & December 2017
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administration of the three questionnaire surveys and data entry 	December 2017
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of questionnaire data and production of a summary of results for each of the three stakeholder groups • Organisation of focus groups and schedule of focus group meetings 	January 2018
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collation and organisation of focus group data • Production of report and recommendations (first draft) 	January & February 2018
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction of interview schedules • Administration of four one-on-one interviews • Production of report and recommendations (second draft) 	February 2018
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submission of finalised draft to Permanent Secretary for feedback 	March 2018
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submission of finalised draft to Minister for feedback 	April 2018
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action plan and time frame 	May 2018
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Production and presentation of final report 	June 2018



BACKGROUND

The national end-of-primary cycle Benchmark was first introduced in school year 2010-2011, a direct outcome of the recommendations in the review of the transition from primary to secondary schools¹. This was meant to effectively replace the Common Entrance Examination, which had been in place since 1978 (for candidates seeking entrance to Church secondary schools) and the Junior Lyceum Examination introduced in 1980 (for candidates wishing to proceed to one of the State's Junior Lyceums). Apart from providing some form of national standard in school achievement in the three core subjects Maltese, English and Mathematics at the end of the primary cycle, an implicit purpose of the Benchmark was to curtail (if not to do away altogether) with the early separation and selection of students on the basis of their scholastic achievement; in this case at the point of transition from the primary to the secondary level.

The Benchmark papers in Maltese, English and Mathematics consist of the following components:

MALTESE AND ENGLISH

• Speaking	- 10 mins;	20%
• Listening	- 30 mins;	20%
• Reading	- 50 mins;	30%
• Writing	- 60 mins;	30%
Total	150 mins;	100%

MATHEMATICS

• Mental	- 15 mins;	20%
• Written	- 90 mins;	80%
Total	105 mins;	100%

All State primary schools having Year 6 children are required to participate in the Benchmark. Church and Independent schools are invited to participate.

Two Church schools did not participate in all of the seven Benchmark sessions so far; a third school stopped participating in 2017. Moreover, one Church school joined other schools participating in the Benchmark in 2014. With regards to Independent schools having Year 6 classes, two never participated, and another two stopped participating in 2017. As the table hereunder clearly shows, this has resulted in a marked drop in participation from 78% to 53% of all eligible applicants in the Independent sector. This brought down the overall percentage applicants from about 92%-93% in the previous six Benchmark sessions to 88% in 2017.

¹ Grima, G. et al. (2007) Transition from Primary to Secondary Schools in Malta: A Review. Malta: MEDE.

Table 1: Breakdown of participation in the Benchmark by session and school sector*

Year	Sector	Total Applicants	Total Eligible Population	Percentage Applicants
2011	State	2638	2638	100%
	Church	966	1233	78.3%
	Independent	389	491	79.2%
	Total	3993	4362	91.5%
2012	State	2298	2298	100%
	Church	955	1202	79.5%
	Independent	354	449	78.8%
	Total	3607	3949	91.3%
2013	State	2297	2297	100%
	Church	924	1169	79%
	Independent	359	439	81.8%
	Total	3580	3905	91.7%
2014	State	2287	2287	100%
	Church	1116	1345	83%
	Independent	313	407	76.1%
	Total	3716	4039	92%
2015	State	2172	2172	100%
	Church	1085	1271	86.4%
	Independent	358	463	77.3%
	Total	3615	3906	92.5%
2016	State	2197	2197	100%
	Church	1089	1275	86.4%
	Independent	329	421	78.1%
	Total	3615	3893	92.9%
2017	State	2248	2248	100%
	Church	1039	1303	79.7%
	Independent	254	484	52.5%
	Total	3541	4035	87.8%

* The basic data are drawn from the annual Benchmark Report from 2011 to 2017.

In the 2018 Benchmark session another two independent schools dropped out. This means that, so far, ten schools from the Church and Independent school sectors have either never participated or have stopped participating in the Benchmark. Clearly, this reality and the potential trend that Table 1 on page 7 suggests seriously undermine the 'national' dimension of the Benchmark.

In each Benchmark session a number of students apply for exemptions and for exam access arrangements. In the 2017 Benchmark session, of the 809 applicants 101 were exempted from taking all the components in the three subjects, while about 470 were granted one or more exam access arrangements. These include children of returned migrants and immigrant children. An increasing number of these children are exempted from sitting for Maltese and/or English exam/s "if they had not been studying the subject during the previous two years of Primary school in Malta" (Benchmark Report 2017, p. 7). In the 2017 Benchmark session exemptions from the 10 components of the three exam papers totalled 1848.

In this report a distinction is made between the use of the terms 'Benchmark' and 'benchmark' (or 'benchmark assessment'). 'Benchmark' is here used to refer to the present end-of-primary cycle exams. With regards to 'benchmark'/'benchmark assessment' this is held to refer to assessments that may be carried out at some point of the school year at any grade level that compare the quality of learning and teaching against measureable standards. Benchmark assessment focuses not only on what children have achieved at a given stage of their educational journey but should also look into the quality of teaching, school leadership, educational resources, and the entire educational experience provided by the school. Thus a benchmark should in part measure student growth and the quality of teaching with a view of meeting the individual needs of all learners. It should also enable school leaders to set explicit targets, identify strategies to achieve these targets and allocate whatever resources are needed to implement these strategies to improve the educational experience of all learners.



METHODOLOGY

The Review Board sought to tap and map out the experiences, opinions, and suggestions of all stakeholders on the Benchmark by means of three research methods:

- questionnaire surveys
- focus groups
- one-on-one interviews.

QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEYS

At a first stage, three questionnaires surveys were carried out among parents/guardians of children in Year 6 who will be sitting for the May 2018 Benchmark session, Year 6 teachers, and Year 7 teachers of Maltese, English and Mathematics across the State, Church and Independent school sectors. The questionnaires were pen-and-paper type and self-administered. Participation in the surveys was anonymous and entirely voluntary.

Several prototypes of each of the three questionnaires were produced covering a wide range of aspects of the Benchmark. Two persons from each of the three target groups were requested to review the questionnaire before the final versions were produced.

1317 questionnaires were distributed among parents/guardians of Year 6 children across the three sectors who were attending meetings on the May 2018 session of the Benchmark organised by the Educational Assessment Unit in the Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes (DLAP). In all 346 usable questionnaires were returned yielding an acceptable response rate of 26.3%; that is about one in four of the targeted parents/guardians. A summary of results is set out in Appendix 6.1.

All the 216 teachers who in December 2017 were responsible for a Year 6 class in State, Church or Independent schools (i.e. the entire population of Year 6 teachers) were invited to participate in the survey. In all 105 teachers returned a usable questionnaire, resulting in a good response rate of 46.6%. A summary of results is set out in Appendix 6.2.

Similarly to the above, all the 236 Year 7 teachers of Maltese, English or Mathematics (i.e. the entire population) were invited to participate in the survey. The 111 teachers who returned a usable questionnaire contributed to a good response rate of 47%. A summary of results is set out in Appendix 6.3.

In the second stage of the consultation process the Review Board organised 40 focus groups with the following stakeholders.

- Year 6 children (ten focus groups)
- Year 7 students (ten focus groups)
- Year 7 students with exam access arrangements
- Migrant students in Year 7
- Year 6 teachers in State schools
- Year 6 teachers in Church schools
- Year 6 teachers in Independent schools
- Year 7 teachers in State middle schools
- Year 7 teachers in Church secondary schools
- Year 7 teachers in Independent secondary schools
- Parents/Guardians of Year 6 children in State schools
- Parents/Guardians of Year 7 students in Church and Independent secondary schools
- Heads of primary and secondary schools in the State sector
- Heads of primary and secondary schools in the Church sector
- Heads of primary and secondary schools in the Independent sector
- State College Principals
- College Literacy Teams
- Parents/Guardians of Year 6 children in State schools
- Benchmark papers setters
- Benchmark paper markers
- Church sector officials
- Education Directorates Officials overseeing exam access arrangements

The Review Board produced several versions of each of the focus group schedule of questions before arriving at the definitive version. The finalised schedule of questions focused on what the Review Board considered to be central issues for the respective target group. All the schedules that were used in the consultation process as well as a complete account of the proceedings are set out in Appendices 6.4 to 6.19.

The focus groups with Year 6 and Year 7 students were facilitated by PSCD teachers in the respective school during a PSCD lesson. This ensured that a 'familiar' person would be facilitating proceedings, making it more likely for students to express themselves freely and candidly. To ensure consistency in the facilitation of the focus groups, two meetings were held for PSCD teachers where the purposes



of the focus group, how to facilitate a focus group, and an overview of the schedule of questions were outlined and discussed. The reports of the 10 focus groups with Year 6 children and those with Year 7 students, across the three sectors, have been organised in one comprehensive report (see Appendix 6.4 and 6.5).

Eleven of the remaining focus groups were facilitated by members of the Review Board; the remaining were facilitated by the Church Delegate for Education. The complete reports of these focus groups are set out in Appendices 6.6 to 6.21.

Participation in the focus groups was entirely voluntary; participants were free to stop contributing to the proceedings and/or to drop out, at any time. The facilitator took note of the salient contributions which eventually formed part of the report on the session. All contributions were noted anonymously.

With regards to focus groups involving minors, there was no need to seek the consent of parents/guardians since the focus groups were held at school and during school hours. As to focus groups involving adult participants, at the beginning of the session these were given information about the purposes of the Benchmark Review and requested to complete a consent form, in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act. With one exception, all focus groups with adult participants were held at the EAU or the NCC. Most of these focus groups were held after school hours.

The three focus groups with Year 6 teachers, Year 7 teachers, and Heads of primary and secondary schools from the Independent sector were not held due to non-attendance by the invited participants. The focus group with College Principals was also not held; however, several Principals submitted their responses in writing. A group of parents of children in State primary schools also submitted their views in writing.

In this consultation phase 262 Year 1 and Year 7 students participated in the focus groups for a total of 19.5 hours of deliberations; 25 Year 6 and Year 7 teachers from the State and Church sectors for a total of 6.5 hours of deliberations; and 101 participants from the remaining stakeholders for a total of 12.25 hours of deliberations. That is, in all, 388 stakeholders participated in the focus groups for a total of 37.25 hours of deliberations.

The third stage of the consultation process was meant to consist of five one-on-one interviews with MEDE, Directorate and MUT officials as follows:

- Director General, Educational Services
- Director, Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes
- Director, Quality Assurance Department
- Chief Information Officer, MEDE
- MUT Representative

A series of interview questions were formulated by the Review Board for use with each of the above interviewees. The schedule of questions was forwarded to the interviewees well ahead of the session, as was an information sheet outlining the purposes of the Benchmark Review. Before the start of the interview, interviewees completed a consent form, in line with the requirements of the Data Protection Act. The interview sessions were audio recorded as an *aide-memoire*. Each interview took no more than 60 minutes.

The interview with the MUT Representative was not held as repeated requests to hold the interview proved futile. The salient points arising from each of the four interviews are reproduced in Appendix 6.22 to 6.25.

This brings the number of stakeholders who participated in the wide-ranging consultation process embarked upon by the Review Board to 954².

² The Benchmark Review Board wishes to thank all participating stakeholders whose contributions informed and motivated many of the recommendations set out in this report. It is also very grateful to the PSCD teachers who facilitated the 20 focus groups with Years 6 and 7 students, as it is to personnel from the Church schools sector who facilitated the focus groups with heads of schools and officials from the sector. Thanks are also due to personnel from the Educational Assessment Unit and the National Literacy Agency for their invaluable support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that follow are in the main organised according to the Review Board's terms of reference. Each set of recommendations is followed by a verbalisation of the relevant findings arising from the widespread consultation process embarked upon. This verbalisation serves as a scientific, empirically-based underpinning that motivated and informed the recommendations. In addition, the Review Board saw it fit to propose a series of measures which are the product not only of the consultation process but also of its deliberations on the outcomes of the consultation process and its understanding as to what the best way forward should be.

Is the assessment method of the Benchmark appropriate for the 21st century, at a time when there are diverse methods of teaching and the digital world has become an integral part of teaching and life?

RECOMMENDATION 1

Although the Benchmark in its present format is serving an important role at the end-of-primary cycle, it should be phased out, not least because its purpose of serving as a national standard is *de facto* seriously undermined with the observed trends of increasingly more schools from the Church and Independent sectors dropping out altogether, as well as by the number of Maltese students and the increasing number of migrant students who are exempted from one or more of the Benchmark components. It is proposed that this is done before the commencement of school year 2021-2022.

RECOMMENDATION 2

In an educational scenario where children progress from the primary to the secondary 'seamlessly', it would make sounder educational sense to replace the Benchmark either with an informal college based or an informal national assessment, possibly including an exam. It is imperative that irrespective of the scale of this informal assessment the results must be used at the very least to inform the receiving school about the scholastic achievement of pupils in a valid and useful manner. For this to be a credible and valid replacement of the Benchmark, standards must continue to be monitored assiduously to ensure that the entitlement of all students is secured. It is recommended that this should be in place by school year 2021-2022.

RECOMMENDATION 3

In line with ongoing initiatives in the State school sector to introduce a system of continuous assessment, it is recommended that such a system should be in place by school year 2021-2022, to complement the introduction of an informal assessment as per **Recommendation 2** above. The weighting of the continuous assessment component and the exam component should be such that over a period of not more than three school years this should shift from initially less weighting of the exam to an equal weighting of the two components.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Continued efforts should be made to make available the use of digital technology in exam taking. At a first stage it is recommended that Year 6 students with exam access arrangements (and eventually any other student) who wish to use digital technology in the Benchmark or any other similar exam should be allowed to do so. At a second stage, the use of digital technology in exam taking should be made available to all Year 6 children, at least in part of the exam.

RELEVANT HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE CONSULTATION FINDINGS

Several College Principals expressed concern with the rising trend among non-State schools of opting out of the Benchmark. As one Principal argued, unless all Independent and Church primary schools join all the rest of the schools in participating in the Benchmark, it can no longer be considered as a 'National Benchmark'. One should make a distinction between a National Benchmark or State schools Benchmark. Indeed, since all State Schools participate one might consider having a State Schools Benchmark (Appendix 6.12).

The majority of Year 6 teachers (61%) agreed that the Benchmark determines/influences which method of teaching they use in class (Appendix 6.2). Asked about the top three priorities as Year 6 teachers, participants indicated the following: ensure that all learners progress as much as possible (84%); help children to grow into analytical, critical, and creative thinkers (66%); and facilitate meaningful student learning (49%) (Appendix 6.2). Moreover, Year 6 teachers indicated that if there were no Benchmark they would do more of the following: class discussions (50%); project-based learning (60%); practical tasks in class (64%); and tasks that promote and nurture creativity (71%) (Appendix 6.2). Members of the College Literacy Teams concur with these findings; that due to the Benchmark there is less time in class for discussion, group work and hands on tasks or projects (Appendix 6.13). Indeed, as Church school sector officials opined, the Benchmark may well be

resulting in coaching for, teaching at, the exam and increased attendance at private lessons, thereby not allowing time for the holistic development of students' skills (Appendix 6.17). A participant in the focus group with Year 6 teachers in Church schools observed that the Benchmark impinges heavily on the teaching and learning; lots of revision is done; she feels she has the responsibility of drilling the children. Another participant said that if she taught a Year 5 class she would do fun activities, but in Year 6 emphasis is on working out lots of past papers to give them the skills to complete the exams (Appendix 6.19).

Asked whether the Benchmark is a mode of assessment suitable for this day and age, 42% of participating Year 6 teachers, 29% of Year 7 teachers of the three core subjects, and 53% of parents/guardians of Year 6 children agreed that this is indeed so (Appendix 6.2, 6.3 and 6.1). In addition, asked to compare the Benchmark with the Junior Lyceum Exam/Common Entrance Exam, of the Year 6 teachers who had prepared children to sit for the latter exams 50% agreed that the Benchmark is a more accurate yardstick of student achievement (Appendix 6.2).

The absolute majority of Year 6 teachers (63%) and Year 7 teachers of the core subjects (70%) agreed that the benchmark serves an important role at this stage in the students' educational journey (Appendix 6.1 and 6.2). This is echoed by members of the College Literacy Teams who unanimously agreed that the Benchmark is important because it gives pupils, educators and parents/guardians a snapshot of the pupils' level of performance in the primary cycle (Appendix 6.13); as do participating Heads and Assistant Heads of Church schools who made the point that the importance of the Benchmark lies in providing a snapshot of where each school figures at a national basis (Appendix 6.11).

Most Year 6 teachers and Year 7 teachers of the core subjects agree about the importance of the Benchmark (51% and 56% respectively) and less so would willingly retain it in its present form (46% and 27% respectively). Indeed, the majority of those surveyed (51% and 63% respectively) indicated that they would not (Appendix 6.2 and 6.3). All the Heads of primary and secondary schools in the State sector expressed the view that the Benchmark in its current form is a 'joyless' exam that impinges on children's imagination and that Year 6 students are still too young to sit for such an exam (Appendix 6.10). In an interview with the Director in the Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes (DLAP) the point was made that while the Benchmark is important as it provides feedback to students, parents and schools (it is a stock taking exercise in student achievement) we do tend as a country to attribute to it too much importance; it is not a 'life or death situation'. The Benchmark should be retained but there is a dire need to inform parents what this assessment is all about (Appendix 6.23).

The backwash effect (positive as well as negative) of the Benchmark on classroom practices and learning and teaching processes is amply evidenced by what the various stakeholders had to say. One may argue that this is inevitable since the Benchmark is considered as a high stakes exam. Year 6 children said that teachers rush to tackle certain subjects due to the vast syllabus. Sometimes teachers don't have enough time to dedicate for the explanation, especially during Maths lessons (Appendix 6.4). Parents/guardians of Year 6 children frequenting Church schools pointed out how the core subjects are given a lot of importance whilst the other subjects are set aside. They also observed that to be able to do well the students are being made to learn everything by heart (Appendix 6.21).

Year 6 students even compared themselves to robots, with their teachers constantly keeping reminding them that they have to be attentive all the time because they have to sit for the Benchmark exam in few months' time. Other Year 6 students told a different story: that the Benchmark does not seem to be affecting what is done in class; that all subjects are given their due importance in class, and that they are happy with the learning pace (Appendix 6.4). If anything, this all goes to show that there is no one reality in how the Benchmark is impacting on learning and teaching.

In the questionnaire survey, Year 6 teachers who had prepared children to sit for the Junior Lyceum Exam/Common Entrance Exam were asked whether they felt that the Benchmark as compared with the former exams facilitated the achievement of NCF objectives in their teaching. Results show that thanks to the Benchmark 12% of these teachers encouraged the holistic development of children, 10% developed children's potential, 5% stimulated analytical, critical and creative thinking skills, and 21% promoted a pedagogy that respects diversity and celebrates difference (21%) (Appendix 6.2).

Year 6 teachers were also asked whether they agreed that, compared with the Junior Lyceum Exam/Common Entrance Exam, the Benchmark has resulted in a reduction of anxiety and stress in the children they have taught (50% agreed, being the largest percentage on the response scale); is a more accurate yardstick of children's achievement (41% agreed); has facilitated a quality leap in their class teaching (38% disagree); has failed to facilitate improvement in classroom practices (36% disagree); and that it is pretty much the same - it is an exam under a different name (43% disagree) (Appendix 6.2). It was observed by Directorate officials overseeing exam access arrangements that the Benchmark is a much better assessment tool than the Junior Lyceum Exam (Appendix 6.18).

The consultation process also shed light on how students study for the Benchmark. Most Year 6 pupils singled out the following: past papers as the main study method; ongoing tests; revision papers; private lessons; and following the teacher's studying notes (Appendix 6.4).

Being a high stakes exam it is perhaps inevitable that the Benchmark should be a cause of stress or anxiety to students and their parents/guardians. Year 6 teachers in Church schools made the point that the Benchmark affects the families; even though the parents are told not to panic, they do. There is a lot of pressure from the parents on the children and the teachers (Appendix 6.19). Year 7 teachers of the core subjects who taught students who had sat for the Junior Lyceum Exam/Common Entrance Exam were asked to indicate whether the students who have sat for the Benchmark are less anxious and stressed. Most of them disagreed that the latter are less anxious (40%: Appendix 6.3). Moreover, parents/guardians of Year 6 children were asked how anxious/stressed their child is at the prospect of having to sit for the Benchmark. While 46% indicated that their child is somewhat anxious, 44% confirmed that their child is indeed anxious. Parents/guardians were also asked how anxious/stressed they themselves are on account of their child sitting for the Benchmark. The majority confirmed that they are anxious (54%), with more than one-third of them indicating that they are somewhat anxious (36%). That said, more than two-thirds of these same parents/guardians indicated that they are pleased that their child is taking the Benchmark (69%: Appendix 6.1).

In their focus group, paper markers pointed out that when the Junior Lyceum Exam was phased out and the Benchmark introduced there was a perceptible decrease in anxiety due to the exams. However, this did not last long as at present anxiety is again as high as at the time of the Junior Lyceum Exam, if not even higher. Such excessive anxiety that negatively affects students is generally caused by parents and teachers who both strive to get the best out of these children (Appendix 6.16). Members of the College Literacy Teams, paper setters, Directorate officials overseeing exam access arrangements, and Year 6 teachers in Church schools concur with this; that the Benchmark is causing too much anxiety/stress and pressure on pupils, teachers and parents (Appendix 6.13, 6.15, 6.18 and 6.19 respectively). In the focus group with Year 6 teachers in State schools the point was made that the Benchmark still stresses the children just as much as the Junior Lyceum Exam (even though the feeling was that this should not lead to removing all examinations altogether) (Appendix 6.4). Heads and Assistant Heads in Church schools observed that the Benchmark replaced the Common Entrance Exam, but the stress factor has remained the same (Appendix 6.11). Their colleagues in the State sector stated that due to the anxiety generated by the Benchmark they sometimes encounter resistance and lack of cooperation when seeking teachers to teach Year 6 classes (Appendix 6.10).

The majority of Year 6 children who participated in the focus groups and who were due to sit for the 2018 Benchmark session indicated that they are feeling very anxious and stressed, while others said they either are not stressed at all or slightly stressed by the prospect (Appendix 6.4). The anxiety/stress generated by the Benchmark was confirmed by Year 7 students, some of whom said

they had felt stressed, worried, scared, nervous, panicked and relieved that the Benchmark had finally arrived (Appendix 6.5). These feelings were shared by migrant students in Year 7 (Appendix 6.7).

In the questionnaire survey, 61% of Year 6 teachers indicated that on a typical school day they assign between 30 and 60 minutes of homework (Appendix 6.2). While many of the Year 6 children who participated in the focus groups made the point that in Year 6 they have too much homework, and more homework than in previous years, others said that this is not the case (Appendix 6.4). Year 7 students confirmed that they used to have more homework in Year 6 (Appendix 6.5). On the other hand, 58% of parents/guardians of Year 6 children who were surveyed did not agree that their children were being given too much homework, as compared with 32% who agreed as much (Appendix 6.1). The majority of Year 6 teachers participating in the questionnaire survey (45%) are in agreement that the Benchmark is fuelling the demand for private lessons (Appendix 6.2). Just over one-third (35%) of parents/guardians of Year 6 children who participated in the questionnaire survey indicated that their children are attending private lessons, mostly in Mathematics (89% of these respondents), followed by Maltese (83%), and English (79%). Moreover, of these respondents, 77% said that their child attends for 90 minutes or more of private lessons per week (Appendix 6.1). Some of the Year 6 children said they had to stop practicing their hobbies such as gymnastics, athletics and football because they have to go to private/extra lessons after school. Others commented that with private lessons it was impossible to have leisure activities, making the point that they would not willingly go to private lessons but do so because of their parents' (Appendix 6.4).

One outcome of having a lot of homework and private lessons is having less free time for leisure activities. Parents/guardians who participated in the questionnaire survey were almost evenly partitioned between those who agreed that their children have little leisure time (42%) and those who disagreed that this is the case (46%) (Appendix 6.1). Year 6 children who participated in a focus group confirmed that they have less free time on account of having more homework, private lessons and more to study for the Benchmark (Appendix 6.4).

Moreover, while parents/guardians of Year 6 children in State schools who participated in the focus groups observed that family life centres around the Benchmark (Appendix 6.14), 78% of parents/guardians agreed, in the questionnaire survey, that their family life continues as usual (e.g. going out for picnics, going to the cinema, visiting relatives) (Appendix 6.1). Although in the focus groups Year 6 children confirmed that they have less free-time because of the homework assigned, they still manage to have free time at home. (Appendix 6.4). This is confirmed by parents/guardians of Year 6 children in Church schools, observing that students at home are pretty much relaxed; extra curriculum activities are kept; business as usual (Appendix 6.21).

Most of the main stakeholders who participated in the questionnaire surveys (Year 6 teachers, Year 7 teachers of the core subjects, and parents/guardians) agreed that it would be better to do away with the Benchmark altogether and have it replaced by a system of continuous assessment in which all the work done during the year is taken into consideration and given weighting, without the need for any form of exams (42%, 41%, and 54% respectively) (Appendix 6.2, 6.3, and 6.1 respectively). This view is echoed by other stakeholders participating in the focus groups including Year 6 children (Appendix 6.4), Church school Officials (Appendix 6.17), and College Literacy Teams (Appendix 6.13). One College Principal proposed that the Benchmark should not be 100% exam-based. Part of the global mark should be through an ongoing assessment; there should be more assessments throughout the years (Appendix 6.12). In the same vein, participating Year 6 teachers in Church schools are of the view that part of the assessment should be continuous and part summative (Appendix 6.19). All their counterparts teaching Year 7 classes felt that the children could also be assessed through several tasks given throughout the year rather than only on one exam. Moreover, a teacher in the group said that she would remove the name 'Benchmark' altogether and make the exam an annual exam (as in the other grades) complemented by continuous assessment. This would ensure a holistic assessment rather than a one hour exam that determines the child's placement in Year 7 and one's future (Appendix 6.20). Parents/guardians of Year 6 children in Church schools even suggested that assessments throughout the year should be done in such a way that the students do not know they are being assessed so as to give a true picture of student achievement (Appendix 6.21). The Director DLAP noted that as from school year 2018-2019 a system of continuous assessment will be in place in Years 4 and 5 in the State schools. This will carry a weighting 40% of the annual mark, with the remaining 60% being allocated to a summative annual exam. That the Benchmark should also move in this direction is merely a natural progression towards such a system (Appendix 6.23). Moreover, in an interview with the Director General (Educational Services) (DG ES) concern was expressed about the challenges of putting in place a system of continuous assessment when there are so many differences from one subject to another; from the languages to the sciences, for instance. The DG emphasised the need for a variety of assessment techniques which is both valid and credible (Appendix 6.22).

Not all stakeholders would want to see the Benchmark replaced or redimensioned. Participants in the focus group with Heads and Assistant Heads in Church schools felt that the Benchmark should remain since stress is a part of life and we need to educate parents and children on how to handle it. Moreover, having no exam would reduce the standards of teaching of learning (Appendix 6.11).

As to what the proposed continuous assessment should be constituted of, suggestions in the various focus groups range from participation in class/classwork/homework, progress through

work in copybooks, oral tests, a test at the end of each topic as from Year 3 onwards (Year 6 children – Appendix 6.4), to quizzes, regular/monthly tests, or other methods of assessment (Year 7 students – Appendix 6.5), to project-based assessment, field work, presentations (e.g. 'show and tell'), and portfolio of work (College Literacy Teams – Appendix 6.13). In an interview with the Chief Information Officer (CIO) at MEDE, it was reported that the Management Information System that will be in place in school year 2018-2019 will make it possible to have an electronic portfolio for each student, which will accompany him/her from one year to the next. This electronic portfolio can be used as part of a system of continuous assessment (Appendix 6.25).

These suggestions do not necessarily exclude altogether some form of exam at the end of the primary cycle. Indeed, paper markers were unanimously in favour of some form of the Benchmark (i.e. a written exam) being continued since they believe that a lack of examinations will discourage students from studying (Appendix 6.16). Some educators feel that the Benchmark is not managing to show what the students really know and therefore a system of continuous assessment is much needed; this should contribute to part of the final mark (Year 6 teachers in State schools – Appendix 6.8). Heads of primary and secondary schools in the State sector were of the view that the end-of-primary cycle assessment could be arrived at not through one exam but in a series of assessments spread throughout Year 6, with a final exam carrying a portion of the marks; thereby children can be assessed through different modes and not simply through a summative exam. That is, a system of weighted assessed work throughout the year to reduce the weight of the end-of-cycle exam, and thereby reduce further the pressure and tension, especially on children and parents/guardians (Appendix 6.10). Their colleagues from the Church sector concurred insofar that assessment should consist of an exam and continuous assessment, and the exam should be less based on knowledge and more based on application of skills. They added that this shift would require a change in our roots – we don't assess what the children know but we try to catch them in what they don't know making this a disservice to the learner (Appendix 6.11).

The majority of surveyed Year 6 teachers (61%) and Year 7 teachers of the core subjects (51%) agreed that instead of the Benchmark there should only be a school/college-based informal exam (Appendix 6.2 and 6.3). Most of the parents/guardians of Year 6 children were also in agreement (44% - Appendix 6.1). College Principals were divided between those who are against the idea of a college-based exam and others who would live with the idea of a centralised informal exam as part of a system of continuous assessment (Appendix 6.12). The Director DLAP is of the opinion that there aren't many alternatives to the Benchmark. He believes that the way forward is to try to improve what we already have. He cannot see the Benchmark being replaced with something completely different (Appendix 6.23). Irrespective of whether the Benchmark is retained in its

present format or whether it is replaced by some other system of assessment, it is imperative, according to the DG ES, that whatever system of assessment is in place this should be such as to provide valid information about the students' abilities that make it possible for educators to meet their individual needs (Appendix 6.22).

Some of the stakeholders taking part in the focus groups were of the view that students should also be given the opportunity to respond digitally (Year 6 teachers in State schools – Appendix 6.8), or at least to answer some components/tasks of the Benchmark on their tablet/laptop/pc (College Literacy Teams – Appendix 6.13). Several College Principals are of the view that pen and paper exams are outdated; this modality should be replaced entirely or in part by the use of digital technology, especially by tablets (a valid tool which should be exploited to the full) (Appendix 6.12). The CIO confirmed that this is indeed possible especially if tablets are used. He also made the point that by school year 2019-2020 a new electronic system should be in place in Years 4 to 6 in all State schools such that we can start presenting exams digitally (at least in part). Eventually, in the not too distant future, the CIO observed that in State schools exams can even be computer presented, with closed form questions being scored in real time (Appendix 6.25). Moreover, the Director DLAP is of the opinion that some of the components of the Benchmark should be presented in a digital format, if anything to keep abreast with the current trends in international assessment programmes. Clearly, all the major stakeholders should be consulted as to the way forward in this regard (Appendix 6.23).

The DG ES argued that there is need for a change in our mind frame centred on summative exams. If we really want to be inclusive of all students (including those with special needs and migrant students) we would be short-changing our students if we are not disposed to change whatever needs changing, including the move towards the use of digital technology. Otherwise we cannot claim that we are being inclusive of all students (Appendix 6.22).

The use of digital technology to administer the Benchmark (or some of its components) or any other exam assumes additional importance in the case of some of the students with exam access arrangements. As two such students in Year 7 pointed out:

"With a tablet I focus more. For example, I hate writing, and with a tablet it is more fun..."

"Because of the fact that my handwriting is not so clear, with the tablet, it is clearer and the examiner can read what I wrote in a better way. Also, this might help me with the increase of marks." (Appendix 6.6)

In the focus group for Directorate officials overseeing exam access arrangements they unanimous agreed that while Benchmark access arrangement are generally appropriate, there is room for improvement. It was suggested for instance that students with access arrangements should be allowed to type some of the answers or work out exercises on their tablet, instead of writing them down (Appendix 6.18). In the interview with the CIO, a list of digital tools available for students with special needs was set out. Somewhat surprisingly, the CIO remarked that there is a lack of awareness about these tools. Perhaps parents of children with special needs are not aware enough of the resources that are available for use by their children when taking exams. He called for an information campaign in schools to increase awareness of these digital tools. The CIO also remarked that there is also a need to train educators in the use of these tools (Appendix 6.25).

Is the Benchmark a just and inclusive method of assessment that allows all students to show what they have learnt and acquired during their primary years?

The recommendations that follow in this section should be applicable not only in regard to initiatives at rendering the Benchmark a more “just and inclusive method of assessment” but also for any other formal or informal summative form of assessment at the end of the primary cycle that may replace the Benchmark.

RECOMMENDATION 5

It makes little educational sense to have low ability students sitting for the same Benchmark exam when the outcome is predictably low, at best. Undoubtedly, this is impacting negatively on these students; not least on their self-esteem and motivation. In addition, the outcome contributes very little to their educational journey save that they are assigned to the CCP group in Year 7 and beyond. This also applies to those who attend complementary classes in Maltese and/or English.

It is therefore recommended that the possibility of having the Benchmark exam papers pitched at two levels should be seriously explored. This should give all students the opportunity to truly demonstrate their competences irrespective of how limiting these may be, and without having to suffer the humiliation, disappointment and frustration of faring very poorly when compared with the rest of the cohort.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Recent initiatives to present the Mathematics paper in the two main languages should be intensified so that this matter is addressed, thereby removing a veritable barrier to those students who would otherwise perform better in the Mathematics paper if a Maltese version of the paper is presented alongside the English version, with students being left free to answer any question in any of the two media. Initially, this should be introduced at the end of Year 4 so that by the end of Year 6 the cohort of students would have become accustomed to a bilingual Mathematics paper.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Now that the use of the tablet as an educational tool is being phased in, serious consideration should be given to start training students in calculator skills. This should serve as a soft introduction to the use of digital technology in Mathematics given that calculator skills are part and parcel of their Mathematics programme of studies in the secondary years. It is conceivable that once this is established the use of the tablet for the purposes of honing calculator skills may be allowed in part of the Mathematics written paper that assesses problem solving skills.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Paper setters should reconsider whether the exam time is sufficient for all students to complete the assigned tasks. It is imperative that if students are to be given an opportunity to demonstrate their competencies then the Benchmark must not be, or serve as, a speed test.

RECOMMENDATION 9

The listening comprehension text in Maltese and English should be presented as a video clip rather than merely as an audio recording. This should help students to understand better the text by presenting it in a context.

In addition, by way of overcoming the experienced difficulties in pronunciation, several sample video clips in Maltese and in English featuring the same persons who will appear in the actual video clip employed in the exam should be available for use in class so that students will have time to familiarise themselves with the pronunciation.

RECOMMENDATION 10

'Extra time' should only be granted to those students who need it according to the statementing report or a formal report from a specialist. To address the issue of additional personnel for supervision duties it is recommended that external invigilators may be recruited accordingly (preferably these should be former educators).

RECOMMENDATION 11

A short period of reading time (not more than five minutes) should be introduced in the Benchmark written papers. This would enable students to settle down and to go over the exam paper before actually starting to attempt the questions.

RECOMMENDATION 12

The scheduling of the Benchmark exam sessions in the three subjects should be made more student-friendly, not least to give students more time to prepare themselves better from one subject to the next and thereby help reduce unnecessary anxiety. One possible scenario which does not overly spread out the exam period is as follows: one of the languages on Monday and Tuesday; the other language on Thursday and Friday; and Mathematics on the following Monday. This schedule would give students some 'breathing space' from the exam sessions in one subject to the next.

RECOMMENDATION 13

A working group should be set up to explore ways of making the Benchmark more inclusive of migrant students. One possible way forward is to look into the feasibility (and the practical implications) of offering migrant students the opportunity to sit for Maltese and/or English as a foreign language as otherwise they would drop out altogether from the Benchmark on account of the language barrier. Similarly, the possibility of having the Mathematics paper in their native language should be explored, at least at this stage in their educational journey. The reporting on student performance should attest the modality with which a student was assessed and possibly the competencies that have been achieved.

RECOMMENDATION 14

Students who are exempted from taking the Benchmark in whole or in part should nevertheless move to Year 7 with a profile outlining the competencies achieved so far.

RELEVANT HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE CONSULTATION FINDINGS

The majority of Year 6 teachers (70%) and Year 7 teachers of the core subjects (50%) do not agree that the Benchmark is an inclusive method of assessment that allows all children to perform at their best (Appendix 6.2 and 6.3). One College Principal noted how, whereas the Benchmark is a marked improvement over the Junior Lyceum exam, it is not however as inclusive as it should be (Appendix 6.12).

A participant in the focus group for Year 6 teachers in Church schools observed that sometimes one has a group of children that simply cannot make it to answer the Benchmark such that one has to coach them for the exam (Appendix 6.19). Educators forming part of the College Literacy Teams felt that the Benchmark is not appropriate for low ability students (i.e. those on checklists 1 and 2) as it is not the 'right' mode of assessment to assess what low ability students know and are able to do (Appendix 6.13). The same view was expressed by paper setters who made the point that the Benchmark is not appropriate for students who attend complementary sessions in any of the two languages (Appendix 6.15). Indeed, 67% of Year 7 teachers of the core subjects felt that it is not fair that potential CCP students should be required to sit for the Benchmark when it is clear at the outset that their performance will be very limited and therefore disheartening to them and to their parents/guardians (Appendix 6.3). Year 7 teachers of the core subjects in State schools who participated in a focus group proposed that not all Year 6 students should do the same examination paper; that papers at different levels should be introduced at Primary level so that all students would be able to show what they really know (Appendix 6.9). In the same vein, Heads of primary and secondary schools in the State sector proposed that the Benchmark should be made up of two levels of difficulty, thus mirroring the situation in middle schools where students are then set in different classes (Appendix 6.10). A Year 6 teacher from the Church sector suggested that there could be a Paper A and a Paper B – the papers could be mapped according to Learning Outcomes Framework (Appendix 6.19). On the other hand, some of the participants in the focus group for Heads and Assistant Heads in Church schools made the point that they are very much against having a Paper A and Paper B paper in the Benchmark (Appendix 6.11).

The DG ES, asked about any concerns she has about the Benchmark, drew attention to students who for one reason or another are exempted from sitting for the Benchmark. She argued that these students (most of whom are emotional cases) have every right like all other students to be assessed at this juncture in their educational journey, not least for them to know what they have achieved so far. Instead of exempting such students, the Benchmark papers should be graded in such a way that all students irrespective of their abilities could sit for the exams and give evidence of what they have learned. Indeed, there should be one yardstick but this should be such as to cater for all abilities (Appendix 6.22).

Most of the Year 6 children who participated in the focus groups identified Maltese and Maths as the two most difficult subjects (Appendix 6.4); also Year 7 students singled them out as the most

difficult exams (Appendix 6.5). With regards to Maths, Year 7 students mentioned mainly problems, especially the wording used to explain them. This was confirmed by paper setters who argued that some students do not understand what they have to do in some problem sums since the questions are provided only in English (Appendix 6.15).

Moreover, analysis of the Benchmark results carried out in 2016³ and 2017⁴ clearly show that the use of English as the sole medium in the Maths paper appears to be negatively impacting on the performance of the low ability students thereby penalising them twice over: the first time over on account of their limited knowledge of Mathematics, and a second time since their performance in Mathematics is further negatively affected on account of their limited understanding of English.

Asked about the issue of having the Mathematics paper in Maltese, the Director DLAP noted that he was categorically against such an initiative if Maltese is the sole medium. Such an initiative should not be imposed on all students, more so in view of the bilingualism in Maltese society. He did not, however, exclude the possibility of giving such an opportunity to that small percentage of students for whom the medium of English precludes them from manifesting their achievement in Mathematics (Appendix 6.23).

In their focus group Year 7 teachers of Mathematics argued that a decision needs to be taken regarding Mental Mathematics since this is a skill which is practised till Year 6 but then is discontinued altogether. Instead, in Year 7 students start using the calculator. This is a device which is prohibited in the primary (Appendix 6.9). All paper setters felt that calculators should not be used in the Mathematics paper, adding that perhaps they could be used if students are given a challenging problem solving task on the tablet (Appendix 6.15).

The majority of Year 6 teachers (51%) felt that the exam time for the three papers is generally insufficient (Appendix 6.2). This is confirmed by Year 7 students who took part in the focus groups; they argued for the need of more exam time in all the three subjects (Appendix 6.5). On the other hand, almost all of the Year 7 students who had exam access arrangements agreed that they needed more time in each of the three Benchmark exams (Appendix 6.6).

3 Borg, M. G. (2016) An Analysis of the 2016 End-of-Primary Benchmarks Results in the State School Sector. Malta: MEDE.

4 Borg, M. G. (2017) An Analysis of the 2017 End-of-Primary Benchmarks Results in the State School Sector. Malta: MEDE.

In the same focus groups, there were Year 7 students who complained that the exam sessions were too long. They mentioned 'extra time' and how they had exams where they had to wait for more than 45 minutes before they could leave the exam room. They suggested that students who finish early should be allowed to leave the exam room without having to re-enter to resume the session (Appendix 6.5). Year 7 students with exam access arrangements made the point that 'extra time' should only be given to students who need it, and not to all students taking the exam (Appendix 6.18). This view is in line with what the DG ES had to say about the matter. She questioned the 'fairness' of having students who obtain full marks (or who do well) to avail themselves of this 'extra time' when they do not really need it as they do not have special needs. This, she argued, undermines the validity of the Benchmark as a yardstick of student achievement (Appendix 6.22).

In the eventuality of allowing students to leave the exam room after a stipulated exam time has elapsed, College Principals highlighted the logistical challenges that this would give rise to, notably the physical constraints imposed by the school building, and the availability of staff to supervise the students once they leave the exam room (Appendix 6.12).

The scheduling of the Benchmark exam sessions was raised by participants in the focus group for College Literacy Teams. They argued that the sessions should be spread out on a number of weeks, a subject per week (Appendix 6.10). Year 7 students with exam access arrangements argued that they did not have enough time to study between different exams; nor did they have enough break time between one exam and another (Appendix 6.6).

Heads of primary and secondary schools in the State sector commented that they do not agree with the timing of the Benchmark in late May. They would rather have the Benchmark at the end of June together with the other annual exams in order to treat the Benchmark like any other exam. The papers would then be corrected by teachers in each school as is the case with the other annual exams with results being completed and sent to parents as is currently done (Appendix 6.10). Officials from the Church sector, College Principals, and parents/guardians of Year 6 children in Church schools expressed a similar stance (Appendix, 6.17, 6.12 and 6.21 respectively). In the first two of these focus groups it was argued that there is much stress on teachers to finish syllabi earlier in the year thereby resulting in a lot of cramming. In fact, because the examination dates are in May, the rest of Year 6 is often seen as almost redundant (Appendix 6.17 and 6.12).

Year 7 students who participated in one of the focus groups criticised the way the listening comprehension texts were read out, complaining that these were in a very bad accent (Appendix 6.5). These students as well as parents/guardians of Year 6 children in State and Church schools complained that the quality of the recording is poor (Appendix 6.14 and 6.21). Parents/guardians of children in State schools even suggested that the text should be read out by the class teacher (Appendix 14). In addition, Year 6 teacher in State schools made the point that comprehension texts are very boring (Appendix 6.8).

In the focus group for Year 7 students with exam access arrangements several suggestions as to how to render the Benchmark more inclusive were put forward including by, for instance, allowing the use of headphones in the listening comprehension and the possibility of answering the written papers orally (Appendix 6.6). Officials overseeing exam access arrangements suggested that class teachers should assess students with special needs. They added that a system of continuous assessment should be used to include portfolios, projects, assignments and a number of tasks in which they have to apply their language, numeracy, and science skills and knowledge. They went on to suggest that access arrangements should be provided throughout the primary years (Appendix 6.18).

Year 7 migrant students made the point that they consider the Benchmark as ‘a very big, big problem’, causing them much unnecessary stress because they feel it is imperative that they are given an opportunity to show their competencies before proceeding to Year 7. In those subjects in which they would not be able sit for, they suggested that instead of a written exam they should be assessed orally (Appendix 6.7). In addition, the DG ES suggested that the Mathematics paper should be in the native language of migrant students. After all, they are at a gross disadvantage of having all of a sudden to learn how to speak and understand two new languages (Appendix 6.22).

Are the questions asked in this assessment truly a benchmark of what an 11-year-old student is expected to know, understand, and be able to do?

RECOMMENDATION 15

Undeniably, the quality of the Benchmark exam papers are a marked improvement on the Junior Lyceum Exam/Common Entrance Exam, not least because various competencies are being assessed, apart from the written exam as was the case with the former exams. But as pointed out above, the current realities are such that the purpose of the Benchmark as a national standard is seriously undermined since increasingly more schools from the Church and Independent sectors are dropping out altogether.

In line with **Recommendation 1** above, the Benchmark should be phased out altogether. Apart from the introduction of informal college based exams or informal national exams, a system of benchmark assessments should be introduced aligned with, and complemented by, the Learning Outcomes Framework.

One possible scenario is to have benchmark assessments taking place throughout the school year to provide teachers with immediate feedback on the extent to which children in their classes are meeting educational standards. This should enable teachers to design learning activities that address the individual needs of all learners throughout the school year. In so doing, the purpose of educational benchmarking as is being proposed here should be to raise standards for all learners, thereby helping all students to grow while at the same time bridging the divide between students at both ends of the achievement scale.

RECOMMENDATION 16

A working group should be set up to explore the best system of educational benchmarking that would best serve the objectives of the National Curriculum Framework and the Learning Outcomes Framework. One possible scenario that should be explored is to have benchmark assessments scheduled at important stages in the students' educational journey over the compulsory years. It is recommended that this is held at the beginning of Year 3, and during Year 6 and Year 8; that is before the transition from one phase to the next.

RELEVANT HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE CONSULTATION FINDINGS

The majority of Year 6 teachers (58%) and most of Year 7 teachers of the core subjects (42%) agreed that the Benchmark is an appropriate, valid form of assessing scholastic achievement in the three subjects (Appendix 6.2 and 6.3). Members of the College Literacy Teams share the view that it is a valid and objective mode of assessment (Appendix 6.13). In addition, 57% of Year 6 teachers and 44% of Year 7 teachers of the core subjects agreed that it is a good yardstick (standard) of what children should know and understand at the end of the primary cycle (Appendix 6.2 and 6.3). Also, most of these Year 7 teachers (39%) and the majority of parents/guardians of Year 6 children (58%) agreed that the Benchmark is a good indicator of the student's ability and of how much they have really learnt (Appendix 6.3 and 6.1). As several College Principals concurred, it does serve as a means to assess performance in the three core subjects being placed as it is at the end-of-primary cycle, but it does not reflect mastery of key competences at all times (Appendix 6.12). On the other hand, in the focus group with Year 7 Church school teachers they questioned the content of the Benchmark papers because they felt that it is not focusing on things that the children really need

for their daily lives; that a lot of knowledge has to be studied that is not related to their daily life (Appendix 6.20).

On the other hand, Heads of primary and secondary schools in the State sector vehemently believe that the Benchmark in its current form is neither reflecting what the students would have learned in the primary years nor giving students a chance to demonstrate their competences (Appendix 6.10). Moreover, Year 7 teachers of the core subjects in State schools argued that the Benchmark is not showing the real level of achievement in the subjects; where the student truly stands in his/her learning. They insisted that the mark is not reflecting the level a student has really reached such that there are several instances where students are assigned in Year 7 to the 'wrong' set in one or more of the core subjects (Appendix 6.9). Indeed, 32% of Year 7 teachers of the core subjects who participated in the questionnaire survey agree that the Benchmark emphasizes knowledge and skills which are not properly aligned with those they have to cover in Year 7, as opposed to 40% who are in disagreement (Appendix 6.3)

While 43% of participating Year 6 teachers disagreed that the Benchmark is just an exam under a different name (Appendix 6.2), the consensus among parents/guardians of Year 6 children in State and in Church schools is that it is the Junior Lyceum Exam under a different name (Appendix 6.1 and 6.21). One of the College Principals observed that the Benchmark replaced the Junior Lyceum Exam, but it is just the latter under a new name. Another Principal made the point that the Benchmark was introduced in order to reduce stress on students but, at the same time, give an idea where students stand in their scholastic achievement. It is still a form of exam nevertheless. As several College Principals pointed out, the results merely help Middle Schools gauge abilities and decide about tracks so as to offer a better education according to specific needs (Appendix 6.12).

Paper makers are of the view that the Benchmark comes too late in the child's educational journey. They are of the opinion that an evaluative benchmark should be held at the end of Year 3, at the latest, so that the necessary remedial action is put in place in the primary years (Appendix 4.16). Parents/guardians of Year 6 children in Church schools are of the same view, so as to be able to catch the students that are not doing so well in school and be able to help them better (Appendix 6.21).

The Director DLAP proposed that the Benchmark should be postponed from the end of Year 6 to the end of Year 8; that is before students proceed from the Middle to the Secondary school, such that students proceed from the Primary to the Middle school without having to sit for the Benchmark. Conceding that this proposal is controversial, he cautioned that there would be a need of a broad discussion among all stakeholders is imperative (Appendix 6.23).

In the interview with the Director of the Quality Assurance Department (QAD), it was argued that being an end-of-primary cycle summative assessment the Benchmark may results in an unfair assessment of student achievement since it is merely based on test scores rather “than taking into account other factors related to learning and which are not easily measured, but which are very important for life-long learning skills” (Appendix 6.24).

What use is being made of the Benchmark results so as to ensure that the teaching and learning practices in the classroom evolve for the benefit of all students? Are the results of the Benchmark being put to good and desirable use?

RECOMMENDATION 17

The outcome of the consultation process shows that the impact of the results on classroom practices/approach to teaching is mainly restricted to sharpening exam-taking skills and coaching in answering Benchmark questions. From the perspective of the students in State schools, the Benchmark is important insofar that it determines in which set they are assigned in the three core subjects. Clearly, this is a very restricted and instrumental use of the Benchmark results. At the very least, students, teachers and parents should be provided with a break-down of the global mark according to the components of each paper.

By way of adding a formative dimension to the Benchmark, it is recommended that at a first stage the scripts should be returned to Year 6 children so that teachers can provide immediate and formative feedback thereby making the Benchmark process a learning experience. For this to be possible the Benchmark would have to be moved to the beginning of May.

At a second stage the scripts should move with the student to the secondary cycle so that Year 7 teachers of the three core subjects may if they so wish use the scripts for formative purposes.

Added meaning can be given to this initiative by implementing **Recommendation 20** set out hereunder.

RECOMMENDATION 18

Information about a student in his/her journey throughout the primary cycle should proceed with the students to the secondary cycle, not only to inform the receiving school about the strengths and needs of each student but also to continue with the student’s profiling (which should include

key competencies and 21st Century skills [Appendix 6.26]). If there are issues related to the Data Protection Act then whatever legal provisions are necessary to enable such information to move with the student should be explored and implemented. If it is one of logistics then initiatives should be embarked upon which ensure that the necessary set up is in place to enable student profiling.

RECOMMENDATION 19

An initiative has been in place whereby College Principals are given the trends in performance of students in each school in their college in the three Benchmark subjects as from 2012 onwards⁵. Principals are encouraged to use these trends to help each individual school to try to improve the quality of learning and teaching in the first place, in the hope that eventually at a second stage performance in the Benchmark is improved. College Principals are asked to impress on Heads of schools the importance of including any measures they wish to take in each school's development plan and that these measures should be followed up.

It is recommended that this initiative is extended and complemented by the school's internal review, the reports drawn up by subject Education Officers (that appear in the annual Benchmark Report) and by paper markers, as well as by the QAD's school external audit report. It is imperative that the way forward decided upon by each school is included in the school's development plan.

RELEVANT HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE CONSULTATION FINDINGS

In the questionnaire survey among Year 6 teachers, 70% indicated that the results obtained by children in their class in a given year influence their classroom practices/approach to teaching in any of the three subjects in the successive year. Asked to specify in what way they are influenced, 47% of these teachers said that Benchmark results made them reflect on their predominant mode of teaching and modify it accordingly; 36% invest in sharpening the children's exam-taking skills; and 35% emphasize more coaching in answering Benchmark questions (Appendix 6.2).

A College Principal opined that sometimes the main purpose of the Benchmark (i.e. to serve as national yardstick of competencies in the three subjects) is almost forgotten, ending up with educators 'coaching' students to get high marks, thus jeopardising creativity and autonomy. Teachers, another Principal observed, are not making good use of the Benchmark marks as they are not taking note of the strengths and weaknesses of the pupils (Appendix 6.12).

⁵ Borg, M.G. (2017) The End-of-Primary Benchmark 2012 to 2017: A Study of Trends in Performance. Malta: MEDE.

In the interview with the Director QAD, the matter of how the Benchmark results will help students to tangibly improve their learning was raised. The Director questioned whether or not the Benchmark places the student at the centre of things. She observed that some Educational Leaders and members of staff ensure that principles of assessment for learning are embedded in the teaching and learning process thereby creating a balance between a teacher-led and learner-centred environment (where their focus is on active participation of the learners). Others focus on rote learning and drilling with lessons being mainly teacher-led (Appendix 6.24).

Parents/guardians of Year 6 children in Church schools observed how children are being 'hammered in answering the past papers' such that if they do enough of them they will be able to get the hang of them and pass the exams. This does not mean that they will be prepared for the challenges in Year 7 (Appendix 6.21).

Year 6 and Year 7 students in State schools are very clear as to what use the Benchmarks results are put to – for setting in the three core subjects in Year 7 (Appendix 6.4 and 6.5). While this reality motivates them to do their utmost to fare well in the Benchmark, it constitutes a source of anxiety and worry. That said, most of the Year 7 students who participated in the focus groups admitted that they are satisfied that they were fairly placed in a set that reflected their performance in the Benchmark (Appendix 6.5).

Asked to what extent are they in favour of using the Benchmark scripts of children in their class for formative purposes (with the same class) 83% of Year 6 teachers indicated that they are either in favour or strongly in favour (Appendix 6.2). In the same vein, paper markers suggested that Year 6 children should be given their Benchmark paper back so that they can check their work (Appendix 6.16). The point was made in the focus group for paper setters that, at the very least, teachers and parents should be given the scores obtained by students for each component of a subject rather than merely the global mark (Appendix 6.15).

A similar question was asked to Year 7 teachers of the core subjects; this time as to whether they would want to use the Benchmark scripts of students in the subject they teach for formative purposes (in the first lessons in Year 7). Just over 60% indicated that they are either in favour or strongly in favour of doing so. A participant in the focus group for Year 7 teachers in Church schools commented that she would prefer to actually see the paper itself rather than just getting a mark (Appendix 6.20).



Year 7 teachers in State schools opined that the Benchmark is important because it should provide information about the level of achievement of students moving to Year 7. They suggested that this information might not only be in the form of a mark; that the primary teacher should give information about each student (e.g. a profile) which secondary school teachers can tap. If need be, time should be dedicated to this before the school year begins so that any preparation can be done beforehand (Appendix 6.9). The Director DLAP is of the view that students and parents should be given more information about student performance and not merely the achievement scores per component and a global mark in each subject. So far, he argued, the Benchmark has been a summative assessment; there is now need to introduce a formative role so that it becomes more relevant to the major stakeholders (Appendix 6.23).

In the focus group for paper markers, the point was made that they would like to see colleges and schools taking in consideration the Benchmark results of their students when drawing up the school development plan. The actual scores could also be complemented by reports drawn up by subject Education Officers that appear in the annual Benchmark Report. They would also like to see the reports drawn up by themselves to be made better use of by schools, teachers and parents (Appendix 6.16). Paper setters, in their focus group, opined that schools and teachers should be encouraged to make use of the recommendations per subject issued in the annual Benchmark Report (Appendix 6.15). In the same vein, the Director QAD noted that the Benchmark results are used by her department as one of the evidence tools as part of a school's external review. She emphasised that schools are encouraged to properly analyse the Benchmark results so as to inform improvements in pedagogical practices; these results should serve as one of the evidence tools in their annual internal review and should be inserted in the action plan of the School Development Plan (Appendix 6.24).

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 20

By way of facilitating the formative aspect of the Benchmark as per **Recommendation 17** above, a feedback form should be completed by the paper markers and made available for students, teachers and parents/guardians once the results of the Benchmark are published. It must be made clear at the outset to parents/guardians and teachers that the published results are final and incontestable and that this feedback form is purely for formative purpose.

RECOMMENDATION 21

It is recommended that the purpose and modality of the mental Mathematics component should be reviewed after consulting Year 6 and Year 7 teachers and students across the three sectors, as well as other informed stakeholders. The ensuing recommendations should be in place in time for the Benchmark session of 2019.

RECOMMENDATION 22

Education Officers of the two languages, paper setters and representatives of Year 6 teachers from across the three sectors, as well as other informed stakeholders, should be charged with looking into the issue of the assessment of genres in the language papers and to propose whatever changes need to be made to address the issue. One possibility is to assess all the three genres in the same sitting. The ensuing recommendations should be in place in time for the Benchmark session of 2019.

RECOMMENDATION 23

The possibility of having teachers who currently teach Year 6 children serve as paper markers (of scripts of children other than the ones they teach), or used to teach Year 6 children, on a much larger scale than presently practised should be explored. Irrespective of whether or not this is possible the practical implications of instituting a system of checks to secure the increased validity of the Benchmark sessions, as well as proper verification and moderation of certain components to increase their reliability, should be explored further.

RECOMMENDATION 24

A working group should be set up to explore how whatever system of assessment is in place this would include the assessment of competences achieved in regards to the 21st Century Skills (Appendix 6.26) and the European Commission's Reference Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (Appendix 6.27).

RECOMMENDATION 25

The Review Board strongly recommends the constitution of an 'Assessment Monitoring Board' to vet the exam papers of the three subjects proposed by the paper setters, including the competencies form of the student profile, not least to ensure some degree of coherence among the three subjects, but especially between the two languages. This Board should have the authority to refer back the proposed papers to the paper setters for revision as needs be.

RELEVANT HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE CONSULTATION FINDINGS

In the focus groups with paper markers and with Church sector officials the point was raised about the need to have clear scoring guidelines/parameters for the two language written papers (notably the composition plan) so as to not to compromise inter-marker reliability. There should also be some congruence in the requirements for the two language papers (Appendix 6.16 and 6.17). Paper markers also suggested that the paper cover should include a table where markers can put down comments and observations (Appendix 6.16). Clearly, this should not be available to the second marker or the additional marker and should contain remarks by all the markers involved in the evaluation of the paper.

Year 7 teachers in State and Church schools, College Principals and Heads and A/Heads of Church schools mentioned that there seems to be little or no continuation between the primary and secondary cycles (Appendix 6.5, 6.20, 6.12, and 6.11 respectively). There were calls for efforts to strengthen the alignment between the two cycles (Appendix 6.12).

One case in point highlighted by Year 7 teachers in State schools and by paper markers is mental Mathematics. Paper markers enquired as to what exactly is being tested in this component; the ability to perform Mathematics or is it listening ability? (Appendix 6.16). Mental Mathematics is not a fair assessment as it is not assessing mathematical concepts only. The fact that it is recorded and students have to listen only without seeing the problem written down anywhere makes it very difficult (Appendix 6.9). These stakeholders believe that mental Mathematics should be grounded in everyday situations. Furthermore, they also stated that it is a real pity that such mathematical skills acquired in primary schools are not built upon in the first years of the secondary cycle, as in Year 7 students start using the calculator, an electronic tool the use of which is prohibited in Year 6.



The restricted choice of genres drew comments from several stakeholders who participated in their respective focus groups. This is clearly the greatest issue in the two languages. Paper markers, paper setters, members of the Literacy Teams, Year 6 teachers from the State and Church sectors, and Year 7 teachers, parents/guardians of Year 6 children and Heads and A/Heads from the Church school sector argued for a choice of genres for the long and the short writing components; that students should be assessed in more than one genre. Moreover, the point was made by Year 7 teachers and parents/guardians of Year 6 children in Church schools about titles which may put some students at a disadvantage. For instance, the title about a local festival is also testing culture and the exposure to certain local activities (2017 Benchmark), and specific science fairs that the students supposedly visited (2016 Benchmark).

There were also calls for checks and verifications of the Benchmark sessions by paper setters and Heads and A/Heads of Church schools. The latter 'alleged' that some schools might be helping their children to perform better. The fact that children stay with their own class teacher raises such suspicions and undermines the validity of results. They suggested that checks by the Directorate should be carried out like for instance by assigning person for every school who would oversee the Benchmark session (Appendix 6.11).

Paper setters argued that there is no proper verification and moderation of the speaking assessment that takes place in schools. They suggested that perhaps a sample of these sessions could be recorded and analysed to ensure some degree of reliability across sessions (Appendix 6.15). They also made the point that since the Benchmark papers are very different from the papers in international assessments such as TIMMS, PIRLS and PISA efforts should be made to render local assessments similar to these international assessments.

The QAD Director argued that there is a need for a national assessment policy from 0 to 16 years that gives a clear direction as to the way forward. Such a framework should identify the different modes of assessment (including benchmark assessments), the interpretation of results, as well as their use in promoting student growth. Ultimately, "the aim of the framework would be to make the assessment process and the assumptions behind it transparent for everyone" (Appendix 6.24).

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTION PLAN

RECOMMENDATION 1

Although the Benchmark in its present format is serving an important role at the end-of-primary cycle, it should be phased out, not least because its purpose of serving as a national standard is *de facto* seriously undermined with the observed trends of increasingly more schools from the Church and Independent sectors dropping out altogether, as well as by the number of Maltese students and the increasing number of migrant students who are exempted from one or more of the Benchmark components. It is proposed that this is done before the commencement of school year 2021-2022.

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2021

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 2

In an educational scenario where children progress from the primary cycle to the secondary 'seamlessly', it would make sounder educational sense to replace the Benchmark either with an informal college based or an informal national assessment, possibly including an exam. It is imperative that irrespective of the scale of this informal assessment the results must be used at the very least to inform the receiving school about the scholastic achievement of pupils in a valid and useful manner. For this to be a credible and valid replacement of the Benchmark, standards must continue to be monitored assiduously to ensure that the entitlement of all students is secured. It is recommended that this should be in place by school year 2021-2022.

Target Date: 3rd Quarter 2021

Owners: DLAP & QAD

RECOMMENDATION 3

In line with ongoing initiatives in the State school sector to introduce a system of continuous assessment, it is recommended that such a system should be in place by school year 2021-2022, to complement the introduction of an informal assessment as per **Recommendation 2** above. The weighting of the continuous assessment component and the exam component should be such that over a period of not more than three school years this should shift from initially more weighting of the exam to an equal weighting of the two components.

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2019

Owner: DLAP



RECOMMENDATION 4

Continued efforts should be made to make available the use of digital technology in exam taking. At a first stage it is recommended that Year 6 students with exam access arrangements (and eventually any other student) who wish to use digital technology in the Benchmark or any other similar exam should be allowed to do so. At a second stage, the use of digital technology in exam taking should be made available to all Year 6 children, at least in part of the exam.

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2019 - Students with exam access arrangements.

Owner: MIU

Target Date: 3rd Quarter 2020 - Roll out for parts of the exam paper.

Owner: MIU

RECOMMENDATION 5

It makes little educational sense to have low ability students sitting for the same Benchmark exam when the outcome is predictably low, at best. Undoubtedly, this is impacting negatively on these students; not least on their self-esteem and motivation. In addition, the outcome contributes very little to their educational journey save that they are assigned to the CCP group in Year 7 and beyond. This also applies to those who attend complementary classes in the Maltese and/or English.

It is therefore recommended that the possibility of having the Benchmark exam papers pitched at two levels should be seriously explored. This should give all students the opportunity to truly demonstrate their competences irrespective of how limiting these may be, and without having to suffer the humiliation, disappointment and frustration of faring poorly when compared with the rest of the cohort.

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2020

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 6

Recent initiatives to present the Mathematics paper in the two main languages should be intensified so that this matter is addressed, thereby removing a veritable barrier to those students who would otherwise perform better in the Mathematics paper if a Maltese version of the paper is presented alongside the English version, with students being left free to answer any question in any of the two media. Initially, this should be introduced at the end of Year 4 so that by the end of Year 6 the cohort of students would have become accustomed to a bilingual Mathematics paper.

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2019 - Pilot in Year 4 with phasing in over the next two school years.

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 7

Now that the use of the tablet as an educational tool is being phased in, serious consideration should be given to start training students in calculator skills. This should serve as a soft introduction to the use of digital technology in Mathematics given that calculator skills are part and parcel of their Mathematics programme of studies in the secondary years. It is conceivable that once this is established the use of the tablet for the purposes of honing calculator skills may be allowed in part of the Mathematics written paper that assesses problem solving skills.

Target Date: 3rd Quarter 2020 - Pilot in Year 4 with phasing in over the next two school years.

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 8

Paper setters should reconsider whether the exam time is sufficient for all students to complete the assigned tasks. It is imperative that if students are to be given an opportunity to demonstrate their competencies then the Benchmark must not be, or serve as, a speed test.

Target Date: 4th Quarter 2018 - The three groups of Paper Setters to be consulted.

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 9

The listening comprehension text in Maltese and English should be presented as a video clip rather than merely as an audio recording. This should help students to understand better the text by presenting it in a context.

In addition, by way of overcoming the experienced difficulties in pronunciation, several sample video clips in Maltese and in English featuring the same persons who will appear in the actual video clip employed in the exam should be available for use in class so that students will have time to familiarise themselves with the pronunciation.

Target Date: 4th Quarter 2018 - Production of sample video clips to be made available for use in class.

Owner: DLAP

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2019 - First time use of the video clips in the Benchmark.

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 10

'Extra time' should only be granted to those students who need it according to the statementing report or a formal report from a specialist. To address the issue of additional personnel for supervision duties it is recommended that external invigilators may be recruited accordingly (preferably these should be former educators).

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2019

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 11

A short period of reading time (not more than five minutes) should be introduced in the Benchmark written papers. This would enable students to settle down and to go over the exam paper before actually starting to attempt the questions.

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2019

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 12

The scheduling of the Benchmark exam sessions in the three subjects should be made more student-friendly, not least to give students more time to prepare themselves better from one subject to the next and thereby help reduce unnecessary anxiety. One possible scenario which does not overly spread out the exam period is as follows: one of the languages on Monday and Tuesday; the other language on Thursday and Friday; and Mathematics on the following Monday. This schedule would give students some 'breathing space' from the exam sessions in one subject to the next.

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2019

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 13

A working group should be set up to explore ways of making the Benchmark more inclusive of migrant students. One possible way forward is to look into the feasibility (and the practical implications) of offering migrant students the opportunity to sit for Maltese and/or English as a foreign language as otherwise they would drop out altogether from the Benchmark on account of the language barrier. Similarly, the possibility of having the Mathematics paper in their native language should be explored, at least at this stage in their educational journey. The reporting on student performance should attest the modality with which a student was assessed and possibly the competencies that have been achieved.

Target Date: 4th Quarter 2018

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 14

Students who are exempted from taking the Benchmark in whole or in part should nevertheless move to Year 7 with a profile outlining the competencies achieved so far.

Target Date: 4th Quarter 2019 - Year 6 teachers to be informed that a profile would need to be produced for each student.
EOs to prepare template and pilot it. **Owner:** DLAP

Target Date: 3rd Quarter 2020 - First time use of the template to profile the student's competencies.
Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 15

Undeniably, the quality of the Benchmark exam papers are a marked improvement on the Junior Lyceum Exam/Common Entrance Exam, not least because various competencies are being assessed, apart from the written exam as was the case with the former exams. But as pointed out above, the current realities are such that the purpose of the Benchmark as a national standard is seriously undermined since increasingly more schools from the Church and Independent sectors are dropping out altogether.

In line with **Recommendation 1** above, the Benchmark should be phased out altogether. Apart from the introduction of informal college based exams or informal national exams, a system of benchmark assessments should be introduced aligned with, and complemented by, the Learning Outcomes Framework.

One possible scenario is to have benchmark assessments taking place throughout the school year to provide teachers with immediate feedback on the extent to which children in their classes are meeting educational standards. This should enable teachers to design learning activities that address the individual needs of all learners throughout the school year. In so doing, the purpose of educational benchmarking as is being proposed here should be to raise standards for all learners, thereby helping all students to grow while at the same time bridging the divide between students at both ends of the achievement scale.

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2021

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 16

A working group should be set up to explore the best system of educational benchmarking that would best serve the objectives of the National Curriculum Framework and the Learning Outcomes Framework. One possible scenario that should be explored is to have benchmark assessments scheduled at important stages in the students' educational journey over the compulsory years. It is recommended that this is held at the beginning of Year 3, and during Year 6 and Year 8; that is before the transition from one phase to the next.

Target Date: 3rd Quarter 2018 – Setting up of the Working Group.

Owner: DLAP

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2021 - The system of educational benchmarking to be in place

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 17

The outcome of the consultation process shows that the impact of the results on classroom practices/approach to teaching is mainly restricted to sharpening exam-taking skills and coaching in answering Benchmark questions. From the perspective of the students, the Benchmark is important insofar that it determines in which set they are assigned in the three core subjects, where this is the case. Clearly, this is a very restricted and instrumental use of the Benchmark results. At the very least, students, teachers and parents should be provided with a break-down of the global mark according to the components of each paper.

By way of adding a formative dimension to the Benchmark, it is recommended that at a first stage the scripts should be returned to Year 6 children so that teachers can provide immediate and formative feedback thereby making the Benchmark process a learning experience. For this to be possible the Benchmark would have to be moved to the beginning of May.

At a second stage the scripts should move with the student to the secondary cycle so that Year 7 teachers of the three core subjects may if they so wish use the scripts for formative purposes.

Added meaning can be given to this initiative by implementing **Recommendation 20** set out hereunder.

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2019 - Scripts are used for formative purposes at the end of Year 6.

Owner: DLAP

Target Date: 4th Quarter 2019 - Scripts to be made available to teachers of the core subjects at the beginning of Year 7.

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 18

Information about a student in his/her journey throughout the primary cycle should proceed to the secondary cycle, not only to inform the receiving school about the strengths and needs of each student but also to continue with the student's profiling (which should include key competencies and 21st Century skills [Appendix 6.26]). If there are issues related to the Data Protection Act then whatever legal provisions are necessary to enable such information to move with the student should be explored and implemented. If it is one of logistics then initiatives should be embarked upon which ensure that the necessary set up is in place to enable student profiling.

Target Date: 4th Quarter 2019

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 19

An initiative has been in place whereby College Principals are given the trends in performance of students in each school in their college in the three Benchmark subjects as from 2012 onwards. Principals are encouraged to use these trends to help individual school to try to improve the quality of learning and teaching in the first place, in the hope that eventually at a second stage performance in the Benchmark is improved. College Principals are asked to impress on Heads of schools the importance of including any measures they wish to take in each school's development plan and that these measures should be followed up.

It is recommended that this initiative is extended and complemented by the school's internal review, reports drawn up by subject Education Officers (that appear in the annual Benchmark Report) and by paper markers as well as by the QAD's school external audit report. It is imperative that the way forward decided upon by each school is included in the school's development plan.

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2019

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 20

By way of facilitating the formative aspect of the Benchmark as per **Recommendation 17** above, a feedback form should be completed by the paper markers and made available for students, teachers and parents/guardians once the results of the Benchmark are published. It must be made clear at the outset to parents/guardians and teachers that the published results are final and incontestable and that this feedback form is purely for formative purpose.

Target Date: 4th Quarter 2018 - The feedback form to be prepared by Paper Setters.

Owner: DLAP

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2019 - The feedback form to be completed by the First Marker.

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 21

It is recommended that the purpose and modality of the mental Mathematics component should be reviewed after consulting Year 6 and Year 7 teachers and students across the three sectors, as well as other informed stakeholders. The ensuing recommendations should be in place in time for the Benchmark session of 2019.

Target Date: 4th Quarter 2018 – Consultation phase launched.

Owner: DLAP

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2019 – Recommendations to be in place.

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 22

Education Officers of the two languages, paper setters and representatives of Year 6 teachers from across the three sectors, as well as other informed stakeholders, should be charged with looking into the issue of the assessment of genres in the language papers and to propose whatever changes need to be made to address the issue. One possibility is to assess all the three genres in the same sitting. The ensuing recommendations should be in place in time for the Benchmark session of 2019.

Target Date: 4th Quarter 2018 – The stakeholders discuss and deliberate the issue.
Recommendation/s put forward

Owner: DLAP

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2019 – Recommendation/s to be in place.

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 23

The possibility of having teachers who currently teach, or used to teach, Year 6 children serve as paper markers (of scripts of children other than the ones they teach) on a much larger scale than presently practised should be explored. Irrespective of whether or not this is possible the practical implications of instituting a system of checks to secure the increased validity of the Benchmark sessions, as well as proper verification and moderation of certain components to increase their reliability, should be explored further.

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2019

Owner: DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 24

A working group should be set up to explore how whatever system of assessment is in place this would include the assessment of competences achieved in regards to the 21st Century Skills (Appendix 6.26) and the European Commission's Eight Key Competencies Framework (Appendix 6.27).

Target Date: 3rd Quarter 2018 – Setting up of the Working Group.

Owner: DLAP

Target Date: 2nd Quarter 2021 – Proposed system of assessment to be in place. **Owner:** DLAP

RECOMMENDATION 25

The Review Board strongly recommends the constitution of an 'Assessment Monitoring Board' to vet the exam papers of the three subjects proposed by the paper setters, including the competencies form of the student profile, not least to ensure some degree of coherence among the three subjects, but especially between the two languages. This Board should have the authority to refer back the proposed papers to the paper setters for revision as needs be.

Target Date: 4th Quarter 2018 – Setting up of the Assessment Monitoring Board. **Owner:** DLAP

Target Date: 21st Quarter 2019 -The Assessment Monitoring Board begins operating.

Owner: DLAP

6.1 Time Frame for the Implementation of the Recommendations in Numerical Order

	TARGET DATE	OWNER
Recommendation 1	2 nd Quarter 2021	DLAP
Recommendation 2	3 rd Quarter 2021	DLAP & QAD
Recommendation 3	2 nd Quarter 2019	DLAP
Recommendation 4	2 nd Quarter 2019 Students with Exam Access Arrangements.	MIU
Recommendation 4	3 rd Quarter 2020 Roll out for parts of the paper.	MIU
Recommendation 5	2 nd Quarter 2020	DLAP
Recommendation 6	2 nd Quarter 2019 Pilot in Year 4 with phasing in over the next two school years.	DLAP
Recommendation 7	3 rd Quarter 2020 Pilot in Year 4 with phasing in over the next two school years.	DLAP
Recommendation 8	4 th Quarter 2018 The three groups of Paper setters are to be consulted.	DLAP
Recommendation 9	4 th Quarter 2018 Production of sample video clips to be made available for use in class.	DLAP
Recommendation 9	2 nd Quarter 2019 First time use of the video clips in the Benchmark.	DLAP
Recommendation 10	2 nd Quarter 2019	DLAP
Recommendation 11	2 nd Quarter 2019	DLAP
Recommendation 12	2 nd Quarter 2019	DLAP
Recommendation 13	4 th Quarter 2018	DLAP
Recommendation 14	4 th Quarter 2019 Year 6 teachers to be informed that a profile would need to be produced for each student. EOs to prepare template and pilot it.	DLAP
Recommendation 14	3 rd Quarter 2020 First time use of the template to profile the student's competencies.	DLAP
Recommendation 15	2 nd Quarter 2021	DLAP

Recommendation 16	3 rd Quarter 2018 Setting up of the Working Group.	DLAP
Recommendation 16	2 nd Quarter 2021 The system of educational benchmarking to be in place.	DLAP
Recommendation 17	2 nd Quarter 2019 Scripts are used for formative purposes at the end of Year 6.	DLAP
Recommendation 17	4 th Quarter 2019 Scripts to be made available to teachers of the core subjects at the beginning of Year 7.	DLAP
Recommendation 18	4 th Quarter 2019	DLAP
Recommendation 19	2 nd Quarter 2019	DLAP
Recommendation 20	4 th Quarter 2018 The feedback form to be prepared by Paper Setters.	DLAP
Recommendation 20	2 nd Quarter 2019 The feedback form to be completed by the First Marker.	DLAP
Recommendation 21	4 th Quarter 2018 Consultation phase launched.	DLAP
Recommendation 21	2 nd Quarter 2019 Recommendation/s to be in place.	DLAP
Recommendation 22	4 th Quarter 2018 The stakeholders discuss and deliberate the issue. Recommendation/s put forward.	DLAP
Recommendation 22	2 nd Quarter 2019 Recommendation/s to be in place.	DLAP
Recommendation 23	2 nd Quarter 2019	DLAP
Recommendation 24	3 rd Quarter 2018 Setting up of the Working Group.	DLAP
Recommendation 24	2 nd Quarter 2021 Proposed system of assessment to be in place.	DLAP
Recommendation 25	4 th Quarter 2018 Setting up of the Assessment Monitoring Board	DLAP
Recommendation 25	1 st Quarter 2019 The Assessment Monitoring Board begins operating.	DLAP

6.2 Time Frame for the Implementation of the Recommendations in Temporal Order

	TARGET DATE	OWNER
Recommendation 16	3 rd Quarter 2018 Setting up of the Working Group.	DLAP
Recommendation 24	3 rd Quarter 2018 Setting up of the Working Group.	DLAP
Recommendation 8	4 th Quarter 2018 The three groups of Paper setters are to be consulted.	DLAP
Recommendation 9	4 th Quarter 2018 Production of sample video clips to be made available for use in class.	DLAP
Recommendation 21	4 th Quarter 2018 Consultation phase launched.	DLAP
Recommendation 13	4 th Quarter 2018	DLAP
Recommendation 20	4 th Quarter 2018 The feedback form to be prepared by Paper Setters.	DLAP
Recommendation 22	4 th Quarter 2018 The stakeholders discuss and deliberate the issue. Recommendation/s put forward.	DLAP
Recommendation 25	4 th Quarter 2018 Setting up of the Assessment Monitoring Board	DLAP
Recommendation 25	1 st Quarter 2019 The Assessment Monitoring Board begins operating.	DLAP
Recommendation 3	2 nd Quarter 2019	DLAP
Recommendation 4	2 nd Quarter 2019 Students with Exam Access Arrangements.	MIU
Recommendation 6	2 nd Quarter 2019 Pilot in Year 4 with phasing in over the next two school years.	DLAP
Recommendation 9	2 nd Quarter 2019 First time use of the video clips in the Benchmark.	DLAP
Recommendation 10	2 nd Quarter 2019	DLAP
Recommendation 11	2 nd Quarter 2019	DLAP
Recommendation 12	2 nd Quarter 2019	DLAP

Recommendation 17	2 nd Quarter 2019 Scripts are used for formative purposes at the end of Year 6.	DLAP
Recommendation 19	2 nd Quarter 2019	DLAP
Recommendation 20	2 nd Quarter 2019 The feedback form to be completed by the First Marker.	DLAP
Recommendation 21	2 nd Quarter 2019 Recommendation/s to be in place.	DLAP
Recommendation 22	2 nd Quarter 2019 Recommendation/s to be in place.	DLAP
Recommendation 23	2 nd Quarter 2019	DLAP
Recommendation 14	4 th Quarter 2019 Year 6 teachers to be informed that a profile would need to be produced for each student. EOs to prepare template and pilot it.	DLAP
Recommendation 17	4 th Quarter 2019 Scripts to be made available to teachers of the core subjects at the beginning of Year 7.	DLAP
Recommendation 18	4 th Quarter 2019	DLAP
Recommendation 5	2 nd Quarter 2020	DLAP
Recommendation 4	3 rd Quarter 2020 Roll out for parts of the paper.	MIU
Recommendation 7	3 rd Quarter 2020 Pilot in Year 4 with phasing in over the next two school years.	DLAP
Recommendation 14	3 rd Quarter 2020 First time use of the template to profile the student's competencies.	DLAP
Recommendation 1	2 nd Quarter 2021	DLAP
Recommendation 15	2 nd Quarter 2021	DLAP
Recommendation 16	2 nd Quarter 2021 The system of educational benchmarking to be in place.	DLAP
Recommendation 24	2 nd Quarter 2021 Proposed system of assessment to be in place.	DLAP
Recommendation 2	3 rd Quarter 2021	DLAP & QAD